

香林 知

Tomo Takabayashi Presents

# 箱は マダラ 水の底!

角川ビーンズ文庫



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# Kyou Kara Maou - Volume 13

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# Novel Illustrations

# Prologue



My soul, who does it belong to ?

# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1



Please help, please help this child. O God, why do you want to take away the son I was finally blessed with ? I don't have anyone other than these children. Even though I don't have anyone other than you and these children!

I had a sad dream. Even though I had no intentions of sleeping, this sounds pathetic but looks like I unknowingly lost consciousness. It was a young woman who broke out in tears kneeling on the ground. Seemed like she was holding a baby close to her chest with its upper body curled up.

Since I do not know of any woman with a sick baby, it might have been an

image left in my memory from some movie I might have watched on TV. In any case it was sad, even though it was a heart-aching dream yet without any sympathy, not even shedding a tear I heartlessly stood by just quietly watching her.

At any rate I was very thirsty, I couldn't even sweat forget shedding tears. I hadn't eaten or drank anything for days, I couldn't afford to cry over a dream.

When I was little and couldn't even differentiate between dreams and reality, I would crawl into my parent's bed saying that a monster came to attack me, if no one else was around me would knock at my big brother's door, but its different now. I'm way past that age and fortunately or unfortunately I don't even have anyone to cling on and cry to in this place.

Thanks to that I woke up with apathetic eyes. It was like sleeping after afternoon classes.

Forget about shedding tears, there was hardly any moisture in my body, it was hard enough just to open my eyelids.

"Aaa! I'm glad that you are awake."

"...Sara ?"

That's why I did not become anxious when I couldn't hear anything other than his voice at first. Since the surface of my eyeballs were so dry I thought that my vision could not become bright. Even though my big brother who is always fixated to the computer and grinning I couldn't think of anything other than - 'I see, dry-eyes is quite a problem!'

I was rubbing my eyes with my fists.

"How long was I asleep for ? "

"You shouldn't rub it so much."

After touching Saralegui I finally realized.

That's right, I can't see anymore.

"...Sara, how dark is it here ?"

"Don't ask me such a difficult question."

Even so, he answered properly.

"It's a little brighter than a moonless night. Because a little light coming from the hole in the ceiling we passed by earlier is still reaching here. Although I can see your face, a person with normal vision would only be able to tell that there is someone here."

Even if he said so I couldn't see anything but the contour. I couldn't even tell whether my eyes were open or not. I can only tell that Saralegui is here. He is standing at a distance that I can reach him if I stretch out my right hand diagonally. I could somehow figure it out not only from the direction I could hear his voice from but also by his breathing and fluctuations in the air flow.

It is a strange feeling.

Even though I can't see him, even though I can't touch him, I can still tell his position, which was really strange.

It's dreadful that I can't see something that I used to. I was fearful. At first it felt like nothing existed in all four directions surrounding me, I thought that I was floating in the pitch black outer space. But in reality the surroundings were dark, I was uncertain even about my footing. With just one step you could fall into the abyss and be unable to crawl back up ever again, if I think about it then I'm unable to even move a single finger.

My pulse fastened and it became difficult to breathe. No matter how much oxygen I take in, it's not enough. Without the blood reaching my brain, my thoughts stop and my conscienceless fades. I tried to leap forward but panickingly stop at my steps and end up landing both my knees on the hard ground. And finally realize after doing it.

There is a ground.

I'm not floating in space neither will I fall immediately if I move a little.

And finally I think about this.

Even if I can't see, it's not like everything has been annihilated.

There is air around me, there is the earth below my feet. I'm living, breathing and moving my body, it's not that I'm dead, lying down and my soul is floating.

Even if I can't see, if I stretch my hand it touches the stone wall, if I listen carefully, I can even hear the sound of the wind.

In other words the world is as it was until now. What changed isn't my surroundings but me.

To support it, a gust of air blew past my body. This is the wind, it's sound. I burnt it into my memory. And the feeling of the dry wind stroking my cheeks. I remembered it as well.

In any case there was nothing I could do besides confirming it one after the other. Even to move forward timidly, there was no other way apart from convincing myself that everything except me exists as it has been until now.

When Saralegui learned that I have lost most part of my vision, he placed his hand on my shoulder and said.

"You can't see?"

His cold fingers gently touched my cheeks.

"Really?"

It smelled like damp soil.

"There's a hole in the ceiling leading to the surface. Although it's not something I can climb with my bare hands...you can't even see that?"

"Nothing other than a vague... white circle..."

"Even though it's bright enough for you!"

He put both his hands around my neck, and hugged me tightly. His hair was touching my face and ears.

"Yuuri, you poor thing! Because so many things happened one after another, your mental equilibrium must have fallen into disorder. You couldn't withstand the pressure"

"um, in other words stress? Stress...that must be it, really. Because of the stress I ended up being unable to see..."

"I've heard a long time ago that if terrible things happen, and they have a huge impact on you, even if you weren't physically injured, it will cause abnormalities

in your body. I think that's exactly the case. You haven't injured yourself anywhere after all. Although you've grazed yourself a little, you haven't hit your head somewhere right? ...however that man died"

That man is.

It made my heart tighten up so much that I could hear its sound. On one side the wall continues.

"But you are living"

But still I'm living.

"It's alright, you will get better. It may take some time though. In any case since you're in the underground your vision is going to be of no use, it doesn't matter whether you're able to see or not... Yuuri!?"

Before he could finish his words I stood up and started walking. Even if I can't see I won't let it bother me, we are in darkness after all. Everything is in darkness after all. I can feel the mud mixed with stones in with my palms. Even if I lose my way, I can only continue on this path along with the wall.

To get out of here all I can do is walk.

"Yuuri, it's dangerous Yuuri!"

After proceeding a little I stopped suddenly and rested my right shoulder on the stone wall. My legs were unable to support my body and I crouched down clumsily.

Being extremely exhausted I dozed off just like that, and then saw that dream after a short while.

"Sara"

"What?"

"I saw a dream"

Even though he didn't ask what the dream was about, I imagined his posture. With his mouth closed, he is tilting his head a little.

"In my dream a woman was crying. The woman was holding the baby was crying while praying to God. She was asking to save her son. The child must have been sick"

"hmm"

"Even though I was watching her from behind, I didn't do anything. I didn't try to call out to her neither did I try to console her. I didn't even cry or pray with her. Even if you think I'm detestable, I was just quietly watching. Even after waking up I didn't think 'I'm glad that it's a dream'. It was a cruel dream, even for me, ever for that woman... but, I only thought of that now"

While still sitting like that I slowly spread out the knees I was hugging. The soles of my feet were rubbing on the ground.

"Even reality is so cruel"

When I talk, the dried membrane in my tongue and mouth cramps, it hurt so much that I thought it would bleed. But more than the dryness in my body, the dryness in my heart was as if it would interrupt my feelings to live.

Maybe the soles of my shoes were worn out due to walking so much, I can feel the unevenness of the pebbles even more than before.

"When I wake up, I feel that it's cruel. This is bad for the woman but to me it would be better if that was reality and this was a dream"

After all I was watching her back. The silhouette of the woman holding a baby and crying was reflected in my eyes. I could see. And her son who was dying is not my comrade. Even if the Gods do not fulfill her plead, the one that will die is that baby, not my comrades.

Not him.

"...what am I thinking about"

I rounded the upper half of my body just like the woman in my dream and rubbed my face with both my hands. The dry soil and the smell of rusted iron that reaches my nose. My body is heavy. Even though I've not even drank a single drop of water, my body felt heavy as if I had been drenched in rain.

"This sucks. It's not only in my head, I gone this far"

I hit my chest with my fist. Even so I can still feel my stubborn pulse through the two joints of my fingers that I loosely gripped. This is the heart that survived till I killed my comrade.

"Even my feelings have gone this far, they are rotten"

"That's not true, Yuuri"

Although his words are very gentle, his tone is bitter enough to make my neck tilt.

"...If that was the case it would be much easier"

"eh?"

Even before I could ask back, Saralegui stood up. The air that had traces of his body temperature moved, his presence is getting away. And then he shortly spoke in a voice that perceives crisis.

"Something is coming"

"Something, I can't tell what you mean by something"

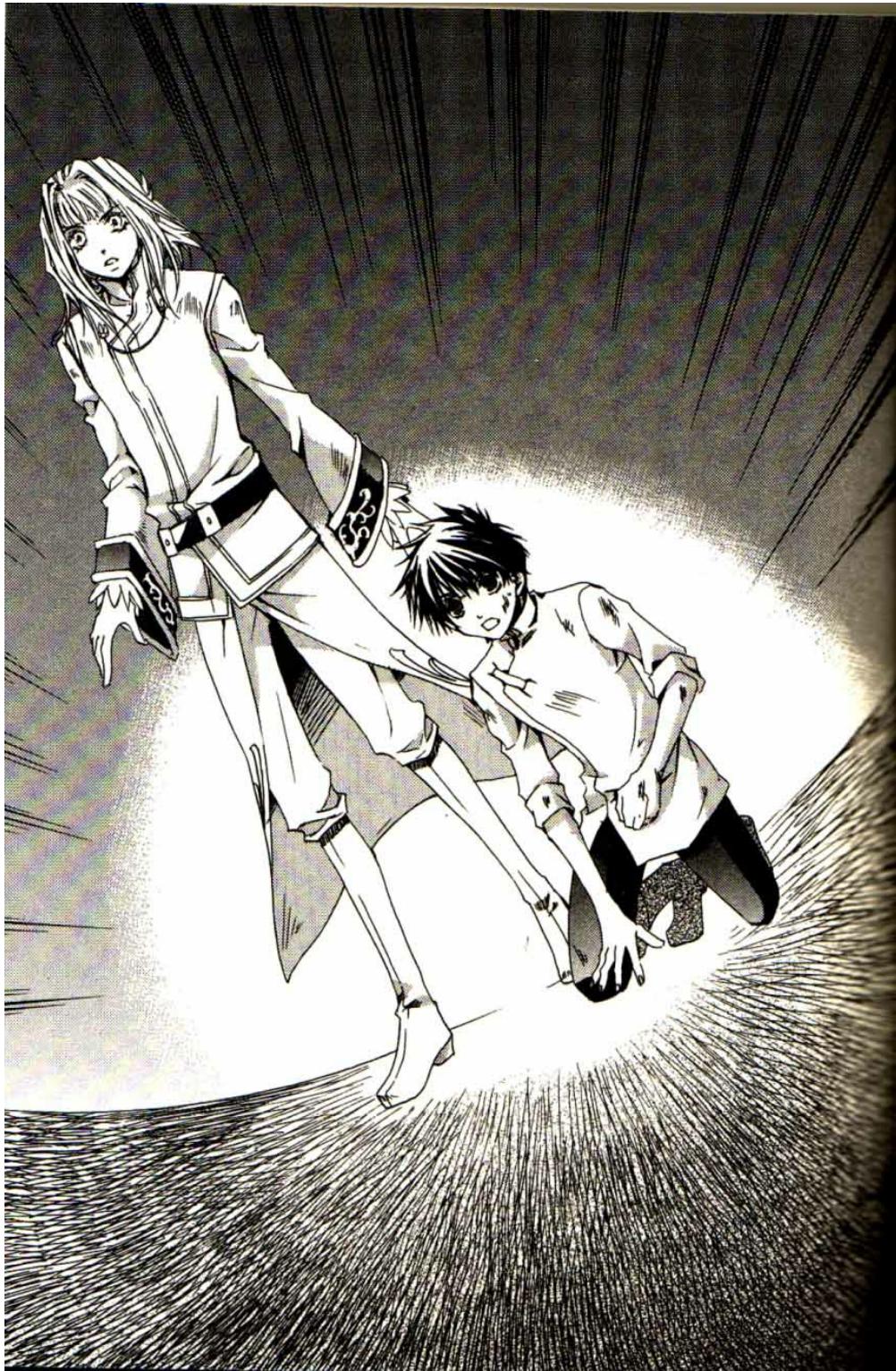
"It's moving, I think it's a living creature"

I can't sense anything other than faint vibrations through my skin which was touching the ground. Even though there is no smell, no wind nor any heat flowing?

"A bird or a bat... get down!"

Saralegui stretched his hand to my back and tried to push me on the road made of rocks and pebbles. But I escaped from his hand by moving my body and got away from the wall and went until the underground passage. Without even standing up or walking, I crawled on my hands and knees like a dog.

Just like before there is faint vibration under my skin.



"Come, come out!"

"Yuuri!"

Sara is screaming. Just before calling my name he clicked his tongue.

"I don't know whether it's a bird or a bat but it's better if it comes out! It's better if it strikes!"

I stood in the middle of the passageway and spread out both my arms. I was unable to stand immediately and got on my knees, gaping my mouth open I turned towards the darkness and shouted.

"Come! I cannot avoid you anyways, I cannot see you anyways!"

A short sound cut through the wind, something warm grazed my cheek.

It was a moment later that the pain started spreading.

The horse neighed and raised its forelegs in the air, Lord Conrart Weller gripped its reins and asked Hazel Graves who was in front of him.

"What was that just now?"

"Must have been an earthquake. We won't know since we are riding, but the animals who have their feet on the ground are sensitive to it. Whether they are running or halted, they won't let even the smallest of change go unnoticed"

"I didn't know that there are many earthquakes in this country"

"It's not what you can call many, it's not that big either. In this town mostly made from rocks, it the trembling is such that the residents don't notice it. If it's the residents of the capital then they are not aware of it"

It was close to five days that they had gathered the horses, departed the city and had been travelling.

As far as they can lay their eyes, they could see yellowish white colour. Five male horses were advancing on the dried soil that can't even be called sand. Lord Weller and Venera a.k.a. Hazel and three of her comrades. Normally they would advance with all their might, but since they don't have any other alternatives to ride they can't ask for the impossible. They were more concerned about than horses than about themselves, conserving their reserved power, they could only barely proceed.

Even so it would still take quite some time to catch up with Yuuri and the others. Whether they were riding horses or walking on foot, they couldn't even catch up to the three people leading them, it was because there were many points where they could bypass them recklessly. They would quickly reach the underground passageway if they proceed at a distance in a straight line.

Even if they turn back they can't see the capital anymore, no matter where they lay their eyes there isn't a single thing in sight.

"You're worried about that child, aren't you?"

Hazel slowed down and aligned her horse.

"If you hear that the underground passageway is dangerous, anyone would worry"

"In that case why did you let him go alone. I had already told you that that place was dangerous"

"He's not alone..."

"I know, that man who looks like the fourth from the Fenway Park was with him right. But if you were going worrying about him later, then it would be better if you would have just tied him to your hands. If it was me I would have done it"

The wrinkles on her cheek deepened as she laughed.

"However no matter how mischievous a girl my grandchild was, her vigor was such that there was no need to tie even a single rope. Even so when I had to make her independent, even though I was concerned, in reality she was able to take care of everything by herself. But I think that that in itself will suffice as an emergency exit. She was the type to whose strong point was to advance rather than to secure an escape hatch"

"April was wise. She even handled the box well"

"Then is your master not wise?"

"That is..."

Conrad clogged at his words. To him Yuuri was special. No matter who he compared him to he could never find anything inferior about him. He even thinks that comparing itself is disrespect. Indeed Yuuri is... his beloved master is doing well enough even after he left him.

Isn't he smoothly conducting political affairs even while governing subordinates with a few bad habits.

Looking at him deep in thought, Hazel let out a cheerful laughter.

Since the cold wind was blowing up yellow particles which were bound to enter

one's eyes and throat, they couldn't take off the clothes that were covering their whole body. But when the strong sunlight dwindles, even if it's past noon the temperature wouldn't rise at all, which would indicate that the sun was going down.

Even if they are careful about the temperature and dehydration, it's not the circumstances in which they could call it a harsh journey.

"The sand is not such that it will trap your feet, you can satisfactorily travel even with a horse in this climate. Even if for some reason if we may have to take a detour, it's not that we'll have to create an extensive passageway underground. Why in the world would the shinzoku of that time create such a passageway till the graves"

"It could be because they didn't want to get lost. Because they didn't have any objective here. If it's someone whose not accustomed to travelling, even if he gets lost in the end, he will turn into dust on this land where there's not even grass."

"There is the danger that they might be swallowed by a heap of sand, as compared to what you call the ominous underground, I think it's much more comfortable here"

"Who knows. I'm just a fertilizer cart pulling old lady, it's not like I can drop by the archives while returning home...there!"

Hazel lightly raised one hand up, and from among her comrades called a man who looked like he had grown white mold in his beard. Ever since they came to here they have tagged along as interpreters, although they originally didn't have the status of slaves, but for saving their cousin during public execution, they threw away their social status and have joined this journey.

The other two include the man who put together the charging and the rescue team while carrying out the plan, and the prisoner who had been rescued instead. Although the very thin man in his forties who would be calm even if someone put a rope around his neck, in reality is "so much afraid that he'll wet his pants", and seems like he is singing in a loud voice to deceive others.

This former prisoner with just skin and bones is their cousin. Although he had been previously called even in the royal court as a singer, at some point he had

to return to the open seas and was sent to an extremely harsh refugee camp. In Freddy and Jason's rescue which Yuuri wishes this man's guidance will be essential.

"Looks like they are masters in what is called the interpretation esoteric skills. I can't think of anyone else other than Mr. Beard when it comes specialization in language study. But if it's him, who has read as much as he wanted to in the Imperial city library, he might be knowing about the origin of that underground passageway. There, the path to the the graves underground..."

Hazel quickly changed over to Seisakoku language. Hazel talked with the demon tribe in English of practical importance, and with her comrades in Seisakoku language. For the shinzoku and the demon tribe to have a conversation, they had to have her translate it into English, they had no choice other than to have her interpret it. Although it's a little inconvenient, they are thankful that they can at least convey their intentions.

"The underground?"

Although it was a little smattering.

"Underground, pass, corpse"

"Corpse... are the dead going to pass?"

The interpreter nodded profoundly.

"The funeral procession will?"

Will? He would be troubled even if he were to question with that tone. Based on speculations the underground passage in question might a facility for the funeral procession to send off the dead to their graves.

"The corpse of the royal family, the graves of the royal family, funeral procession"

"In other words that passage was created in order to carry the corpse of the royal family to the tombs. To put it simply, to put the corpse straight in the graves"

"I see... it means that the dead will not be exposed to the light. It's not that I cannot think of a religious reason"

"Residents, undertaker"

"What?"

Hearing an audacious loose translation, Lord Weller raised his eyebrows.  
Undertaker?

"It seems that the residents themselves are in charge of the funeral procession. In other words it might be a large-scale group of undertakers"

"Again with the special..."

But the corpses of the royal family, no matter how much you don't want to expose them to the sunlight, even among the slaves even if they are called the lower casts would they entrust the residents to them. Even so since they specialists, it's because they have the skill to keep the damage to a minimum while carrying the corpse to the tomb away from the imperial city. Even the bereaved might have reluctantly entrusted them. For instance...

"Something like mummification? It's NO in that case. From what I know, the contents of the coffin had been rotting at a normal speed. It doesn't seem that they are thinking of using the same body even in their next life"

"If it's you, who has visited the graves, is saying it then it must be right. But if that's the case then the meaning of the existence of the underground residents, I can't understand it all the more.

Since the interpreter said something quickly, Hazel's eyes rounded. She looked like she would scream OMG after a few tens of years.

"You say that the living are not allowed to pass? Did you hear that Lord Weller, looks like it was a miracle that I came out of that cellar alive! Thank you God"

Her way of speech was as if a miracle needs to happen in order for them to return alive. Looks like she noticed that herself and added to it.

"It's alright, your king has Buddha on his side. Although I've lived in Tibet when I was young, it was a very valuable experience. I was told that Buddha doesn't refuse no matter who it is. In that case there's no way that he'll not protect a wonderful child like his majesty from disasters. And since the group of undertakers is said to be special, the underground residents are well alive, it's

not like they are refusing all the living. So there's no need to be pessimistic"

"But!"

Whether they were able to understand English or not, they interrupted their conversation.

"Although the underground residents are living it was recorded"

Letting go of the reins, he made action of opening a book with his both hands. As if it was written down in the document.

"Many of them were blind"

"Are you saying they could not see?"

"...It can't be"

Conrad murmured. He suddenly remembered that he was thirsty.

# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2

“W-wait a sec. What is that old uncle with so much energy and performing radio aerobics doing?!”

“Looks like he’s really looking forward to scuba diving—”

On the sides of a little boat dimly illuminated on the surface of foreign lake at night, two Japanese and American students are whispering to each other. In the middle of the boat is a man of unknown age, wearing sunglasses and performing warm-up exercises full-heartedly with the lower half of his body dressed strangely in rubber diving gear.

“Hmm, hah! Hmm, hah! Hmm, hah! Hmm, hah!”

Who would have thought that his abs are actually pretty strong.

“You said he wants to dive... But he’s wearing sunglasses, and it’s nighttime... Does he think he’s part of Ishihara Promotion’s [1] USA branch?”

“Speaking of which, Shouri hasn’t taken your glasses off either.”

“I’m fine, glasses are a part of the face.”

“Whoa~~ Then you are discriminating against sunglasses.”

Shibuya Shouri thinks to himself, I should instill the respect of glasses men deep into this person’s heart. No matter who it is, anyone who puts on sunglasses will look a lot manlier, but people who look hotter after wearing normal glasses are way fewer. No matter what kind of trendy frames they wear, if the person wearing them is just meh then there’s no point: In other words, those who can look hotter are the really impressive ones. Those who don’t rely on sunglasses, or contact lenses, and win with just true glasses, they’re the ones that should be honored as the world’s treasures.

But what is reality like?

“You plan on wearing your glasses instead of goggles--?”

“Of course, if I don’t wear my glasses how do you expect me to find the Box?”

“A-ha--?”

Just like the Americans from the educational films, she shrugs, her expression full of contempt!

“Before all that I have to ask, do you guys actually know how to dive?”

The Asian man controlling the plane and the boat asks with heavily accented English. He’s sitting on top of the boat cabin, swinging his short legs and looking all carefree. Next to him is a scary-looking Frenchman born in the Caribbean—Francois, who has his arms crossed in front of his chest and doesn’t utter a word. The two of them seem to know each other, even greeting each other with a language Shouri doesn’t understand when they were introducing themselves at the airport.

The Asian man’s name is DTJ, which sounds like the acronym of a theme song band, so it shouldn’t be his real name.

He’s the pilot of the rented plane, and seems to be an old acquaintance of Bob and Abigail. Apparently his flying skills are the best in the world, but he’s wearing a Yankees ball cap and a striped shirt, add that to his slightly wide chin, and you can’t tell what age he is. He feels younger than Shouri, but even in the country of freedom America, someone that young can’t possibly get a pilot’s license. That mouth of his never has anything good to say, though, he even keeps purposely trying to rile up Shouri, whom he just met.

“You’re Japanese? I’ll say this now, the J at the back of my name doesn’t stand for Japan.”

The way he places emphasis on it, seems to indicate he doesn’t have a good impression of Japan.

The Asian guy whose age you can’t tell and the scary-looking Frenchman, the longer you look at them the stranger this combination seems.

“If you don’t have any diving experience you have to tell us honestly--! Even if I am the warrior protector of the people, I can’t save two or three people at once —”

“What the heck is the warrior protector of the people? Is that a relative of Naniwa Mozart<sup>[2]</sup> or something!? I’m telling you, I can! I know how to dive! Isn’t that obvious? I’m Japanese! It’s just diving in a lake, what’s so hard about that!”

Half of the Japanese are samurais or geishas, while the other half are ama<sup>[3]</sup> and fishermen. The super college student whose goal is to become governor shouldn’t be able to handle it. Even the notorious Kachabi<sup>[4]</sup> can play with the fishes in the southern sea, it’s no problem as long as you don’t have Mukku’s<sup>[5]</sup> bloodline.

Shouri pulls the skintight rubber diving suit up to his shoulders, and it’s tighter than he thought it would be. Once he pulled the zip up to his neck, it would easy as pie to tell where his nipples are, huh.

“Hmm, he! Hmm, he! Hmm, he! Hmm, he!”

Bob is focused on his warm-up exercises.

“Let’s take this opportunity to get it over with now!”

Shouri quietly hastens Abigail Graves, who allegedly has an instructor’s license.

It’s just that he never thought there would be such a surprising talent in this world. The koi fish girl who sat all alone in the airport, is actually a world-famous treasure hunter (or so she says), as well as a cheerleading captain, diving instructor, and a half-assed Japan expert. Although to the neighbors Shouri is an excellent older brother, his resume is a little less impressive.

The way things are looking now, it’s not hard to imagine how amazing the talents in the future will be. After all, the Maou of the financial world known as ‘Bob Airlines’ once danced the samba in the middle of the shopping street; so the man who was yesterday known as a simple Gundam otaku, might actually be a new type of extremely reliable human.

...That’s right.

No matter what you want to do, the most important thing is money.

Even if you want to strike first, putting one foot up while pretending to be clueless, you can't do anything without money. No matter how justified your actions are, it's the same.

"This is too much, I get suspected even when I use cash to buy plane tickets. Logically speaking, shouldn't it be safer to shop with cash and a smile? You don't have to worry about being a credit card slave!"

"Don't blame America—"

"I'm not blaming any specific country!"

Murata Ken is just against the employee who looked at him suspiciously when he paid for his plane ticket in cash just now. Even if a high school student has a credit card, the limit would be very limited. After all his family is just a normal working class family, and can only share the limit on one card.

That's why he had to use cash, and got a suspicious 'where did you get this money come from' look for his trouble. This country has so many people who started companies with their stocks, and students who earned big bucks at a young age! But on the other hand, they also have a lot of young people who commit crimes, dirty their hands, and walk the wrong path.

"Really, do I look like a drug mule? I wouldn't want to sacrifice my life like that just for drugs!"

Murata releases a long breath, trying to calm himself down a bit.

"But the thing I want to transport is even more dangerous than drugs."

"It shouldn't be you, is it, Ken."

"I know, it's me. Relax! I can still tell the difference."

In the end, Rodriguez was the one who bought the ticket for the change of flights from New York.

He seems to really enjoy his role as a guardian, the laugh lines on his face deepening. He takes off his aviator goggles, even putting on the jacket he rarely wears, trying to pretend he's Murata's parent. Jose Rodriguez is an excellent pediatrician. This is the job he chose for himself, so he never hated taking care of kids in the first place; plus this is a child he treated before, so it's obvious he

would help.

Murata and Rodriguez have taken a different mode of action from Bob and the others, who took a private plane to Switzerland. The two of them headed for New York from Narita, and then from New York flew to the Logan International Airport in Massachusetts.

“Because Japanese people look younger—they must have thought you were a middle school student traveling on your own—”

“If it’s to find an important friend, so what if a middle school student rides a plane!”

“You’re not wrong, but the rules here are stricter, like if a divorced father took his son away on his own, it would be treated as a kidnapping, you know—”

“I feel that a middle-aged Latin American man and a Japanese student walking together is weirder... Ah~ Doctor, don’t put on such a pitiful expression! I’m really glad you left Bob to stay by me, but...”

The international airport in the afternoon is so crowded it’s scary. Although it’s not the tourism season, there are quite a few people dragging their luggage and running around everywhere. Murata sticks closely to his companion, scared of getting lost in the crowd, and looks up at the skinny Mexican.

“What we’re doing now is going against his orders, will that have any effect later? I hope it won’t have some bad influence on your work or anything.”

“What are you talking about, Ken? I’m just a pathetic little pediatrician, you know--? Even if Bob wants to pressure me, he wouldn’t bother with that clinic of mine that never earns much! Plus, he’s not that kind of person.”

“That’s great. Since you bypassed him and contacted me directly, I’ve been very worried for you.”

“Mn. Because Ken, I’m guessing you would rather let Bob know first.”

“Of course.”

The mastermind of the group Rodriguez belongs to, is Bob who should now be in Switzerland together with Shouri and the others. That’s why his actions, of giving Murata important information without going through Bob, could be taken

as a betrayal and he wouldn't be able to deny it.

Murata got the intel regarding the 'Box' from Rodriguez a few weeks ago. Before he hung up the phone, he said, "If you want to do that, you can report to Bob first, no problem." Back then Murata immediately answered, "I'll see how it goes."

"What we do from now on is all up to you!"

"I think it should be up to Bob, right? His ratings in my mind have plummeted. Who asked him to talk about using 'Mirror's Depth', even if it's to fulfill Shibuya's brother's wish he shouldn't do that, right?"

"Hmm—But he's not usually so rash--? Maybe it's that once it gets to JUNIOR he becomes a doting father?"

"But they're not father and son!"

The pediatrician smiles shyly, using those fingers with joints as obvious as old sticks to push the hair out of his eyes, though some locks of unruly hair still stick to his face.

"When it comes to that, I can understand how he feels. Speaking of parents, is this okay with your mom and dad?"

"Don't worry, both of them have keys."

The pediatrician's expression says 'that's not what I meant', but that's indeed what real life is like, it can't be helped that he answers like that.

"If you think about the good side, they don't care about me at all, adopting a free and easy approach to some extent. As long as I leave a note saying I'm staying at a friend's place, they won't come looking for me. But the truth is they don't know any of my friends, so they wouldn't know where to start looking even if they wanted to. I told them, the school is taking a week off for the school anniversary, so I'm going on a trip. And they said, without a care in the world, 'It's okay, as long as we can reach you by phone. But first you have to confirm your accommodation.'"

"Ken."

The man who was once his guardian before he was born frowns a little, turning

the corners of his mouth down unhappily.

“Aren’t you lonely?”

“Lonely? Why?”

Just then a young girl runs past the two of them, yelling something childishly. A woman that looks like a mother waves at her from the blue benches, using French to whisper something as she lifts her onto her laps, hugging her waist tightly. Quite a few flights from the aviation companies pass by Logan, so there are many tourists headed for Europe here. Rodriguez watches the scene, murmuring almost to himself,

“...Did I make the wrong choice?”

“What choice?”

“Your family? Bob chose a very perfect family for Shibuya to be born in, but I was the one who chose the family you were born in. Actually, until the very end, I was hesitating whether or not to let you be born in a wealthy childless family in Hong Kong. The one before-you know, that one—stayed in Hong Kong, right? But in the end, I handed you over to a very normal Japanese couple... Was I wrong in doing that? If I you were born in a wealthy family, wouldn’t it be better for you to be an international young master—”

“Hah?”

Murata is shell-shocked by his sudden words, slowing down his steps and staring at the other man.

“It’s because from what you’re saying, it seems like you don’t have the warmth of a family, so I’m wondering if you’re happy.”

“There’s no such thing, Doctor!”

Murata can’t stand his wild imagination. Since he’s already a Japanese, he hurriedly refutes the other option:

“Sure, it’s tempting to be born in a wealthy family, but if I was born there, it would surely be a lot more hassle to come to Japan. Besides, if I became the heir to a wealthy family, my family would not let me move overseas so easily, so wouldn’t I waste a lot of time before meeting him?”

“Meeting who? Yuuri?”

“That’s right, so it was the best choice to make me Japanese.”

“But Ken—”

The pediatrician pushes his glasses up with his index finger, the nail trimmed short, because his retro-style frames are almost going to slide off his nose.

“...He is the person you are willing to sacrifice a loving family to get?”

“That’s right.” Influenced by his actions, Murata pushes up his glasses too, answering with a nod,

“That’s right, no matter what I want a friend like that. Not the new Maou, I just want someone I can talk about everything with. I want a comrade I can trust my all in, I want a friend.”

The Frenchman who never opened his heart out to others, and the poor girl who couldn’t acknowledge her memories, spending all her days looking for the truth—that’s the thing both of them could never get.

“I always wanted Shibuya Yuuri.”

And now I got him.

“So right now I’m extremely happy, y’know!”

No matter what I don’t want to lose him, even if I have to make enemies of others.

When he held his fist he used a bit of force, too. But those emotions quickly retreated into his body, and he acts cheerful as he continues,

“Besides, I think you may have misunderstood some things, so I’ll explain it for you first, Doctor. Those people... In other words, my parents, I believe they love me a lot, y’know! It’s just that there haven’t been any problems in my growing up so far, so as parents they may seem a little callous. After all, I’m a model student, so they really trust me. If I suddenly started selling ‘legal’ drugs on the street, they would definitely be shocked, and try to bring me back to the right path, even if it means giving up their jobs. But first my father would probably faint from the impact.”

“A model student suddenly starts selling drugs, that sort of life change is way too dramatic. Ow!”

A young man brushes past them, his backpack knocking into Rodriguez’s shoulder and causing him to stumble. Although Rodriguez is healthy, he’s thin as a stick. Compared to the luggage of a frequent traveler, the luggage may actually be heavier than him.

“Although we’re average citizens, you could say our travelling style is pretty high class.”

Taken aback by Bob and Shouri’s unexpected actions, they hadn’t brought anything before running straight for the airport, so all the luggage they had at hand were their wallets and passports.

Then they stuffed their wallets into the plastic bag they got with the tourist map at the nearby bookstore, while the green booklet went into their inner pockets. As for clothes to change into and other toiletries, they plan to buy these things once they got to their destination. Going on the road with what they had is definitely very light and easy, but no one would think that they were planning to go overseas like this. Thankfully, too, because this way they didn’t need to fight with everyone else at the luggage retrieval area, and can quickly pass through the customs counter under the ‘Welcome to Boston’ sign.

“You don’t have to worry about that. Our destination—Freeport is a city known as a commercial center, you could cover yourself from head to toe in branded clothes!”

“The one who needs a branded suit is you, right?”

Murata scrutinizes his companion, whose crumpled jacket looks like something bought for cheap at a Japanese motel, an outfit that doesn’t fit his status at all. Although he was a resident doctor, he’s still an expert in pediatrics, so there should be a limit to how little he cares about his dressing, right? He could take this opportunity to prepare some clothes for himself—clothes that would let him stand on the stage of an American national pediatrics conference.

“...Forget the commercial center for now, right now I’ll be grateful to god as long as the place we’re headed to isn’t the Boston city center.”

There are too many things in Boston that bring up memories of the past for him. The Graves family house is right there on Beacon Hill, and that shop in Chinatown should still be around.

Of course those aren't parts of Murata's own past, but since something happened and he awakened, in the end they're no different from things that happened to him personally. If he could avoid them, that would be best.

I wonder if a monologue like this could be overheard.

On the other side, the group headed for Switzerland has encountered an inevitable situation.

The headlights shine blindingly onto the surface of the water, the boat Shouri and the others are on is now surrounded by a group in green.

They're all armed to the teeth. And even worse, all the guns are pointed at Shibuya Shouri & Bob *et al.* Putting aside from the squad waiting for their orders on the bank, there are at least twenty-over people just on the boats approaching them.

"Twenty-four Eyes<sup>[6]</sup>... No, there are twenty-odd guns pointed at me."

"Even I've only ever had twenty guns pointed at me, huh—"

Bob, who is particularly reliable at times like this, is still in his warm-up exercises mode. He's doing the first move from radio aerobics, 'Stretch your arms forward, stretch your back upwards!' The way he has his arms raised up high is quite fitting for the moment.

As for the remaining four, they all have their hands raised beside their faces. After all, having twenty-odd guns pointing at them, no matter how powerful a superhero would still have to give up protesting and put on a smile.

"But why must we accept the cops' 'concern', huh? Forget bringing the Box up, we haven't even dived in! Or is this place—out of bounds for swimming?"

If it's just to reprimand tourists for swimming against the rules, they're overreacting just a bit.

Shouri is acting dumb, but hearing his words Abigail doesn't think much before replying with a ton of insider jargon,

"Really, Shouri, these people aren't cops, they're the army, you know! Look closely, they're not holding .38, but 9mm guns!"

"I still can't tell even if I look closely!"

"When you say that, it feels very 'as expected of a Japanese person'."

Abigail's tone is very relaxed. Even though she acts nonchalant, but when she talks to Shouri, she switches to speaking in English, proving that the situation isn't as simple as she says it is. To Shouri, he simply can't tell the difference between the diameters of each gun. Not only that, in every three enemy soldiers, there's one holding something that looks like a machine gun.

"If it's the army then that's even more ridiculous, why would we be surrounded by the army? And more importantly, if we were hit by that kind of weapon would it 'hurt', 'hurt a little', or 'hurt so bad I want to die'?"

"It wouldn't hurt, you'd die before you could feel pain."

Just as the self-proclaimed warrior protector of the people DTJ mutters that, the boat suddenly starts rocking violently. Turns out the soldiers surrounding them are yelling warnings as they board the boat, but Shouri can't understand what they're saying at all. What's the main language in Switzerland? Swiss?

Abigail uses a bone-chilling expression, yelling back at them in a rude tone.

"G-Graves, there's no need to be so angry, it's best not to do anything rash at a time like this..."

"I'm not angry! That's what retorting in German sounds like! But thank goodness, these people are Swiss soldiers—"

"Why would you say so?"

"Although my great grandfather was German, the problem is he used to be a war criminal, and was forbidden from entering Germany."

"What the hell did your great grandfather do!?"

Abigail is yelling in German, Bob is speaking in fluent French, Francois is as

composed and quiet as ever, while DTJ scolds \*\*\* and \*\*\* as he picks his nose.

Shouri looks up into the sky, still dressed in his diving suit, waiting whole-heartedly for a young celebrity in a helmet to appear holding a sign that says 'You've been pranked'.

The driver of the RANGE ROVER approaching them is almost forty years old. He's wearing a yellow cap over his curly brown hair, a large man in green camouflage clothing.

Once he sees Murata and Rodriguez coming out of the arrival hall, he throws away the donut he was biting to raise his hand in salute. The driver is saluting? Murata finds this unbelievable, but Rodriguez seems very used to his actions, raising his right hand lightly to return the salute.

"Hi~ Matthew, long time no see. You're a bit different from usual—Don't tell me now it's... Sergeant?"

"Long time no see, Captain! Nah, about that—Of course I would want to be a soldier of the Allied Forces forever, but that--- my son desperately says he wants to invade the Blue Planet—On the other hand, Captain, are you part of the Suit Squad now?"

"Mn, there are a lot of factors involved here. Oh, right, I bought some souvenirs in Tokyo, but since I didn't want to bring luggage, I had them mailed back home. Later I'll divide them amongst you."

"It is our honor, Captain!"

Compared to their honor, the driver's almost drooling at the idea of the souvenir's contents, even doing something an American taxi driver never would—getting out of the car and opening the door for us.

"Let me introduce you. Ken, this is Matthew Orson, a friend I've known since the White Base period."

What on earth is the White Base period? Is it okay to think of it as something along the lines of the Cold War or Kamakura period... Just as Murata is thinking

that, a memory from his childhood when he was treated by Rodriguez awakens. In the beginning the pediatrician had asked,

“What MS do you like~?”

“... So, could it be... No, of course it is, the two of you are Gundam-related, right?”

Rodriguez and Matthew Orson are all smiles, putting their arms over each other's shoulders,

“That's right, that's right. We are forever Gun-pals, right—”

But time will change a person.

Influenced by his son, Matthew Orson has gotten interested in other anime, until even his rearview mirror has some green-colored ornament. Looks like he's really into frogs as well.”

“There's a man with long-lost flight genes in his blood over there, we're going to meet hi...s grandson, so we're asking Matthew for help. And he knows the person we're going to see, too—”

Apparently the special pilot of Bob Airlines is the grandson of the flight genius called DT. But a man with two strange titles like that, wouldn't he be about the same as Gundam otaku Orson? Forget it, if it was just driving in a city with normal traffic, they might as well grab one of the local high school students.

Just as Murata looks out of the moving car window...

“Wait a sec!? That was an orange amphibious-looking car that just brushed past us, right!? Don't tell me Boston is where the army has drills in the middle of the city in broad daylight!?”

“Ah—That's nothing, just one segment of the novelty tour!”

“Novelty tour!? I thought it was some army vehicle.”

The respect and surprise he feels chases away Murata's tension all at once. He relaxes his shoulders, slumping into his seat like a rain-drenched ragdoll. Maybe it's because the car interior is really warm, so the sleep bug takes over him instantly, after all he didn't sleep much on the plane.

“...Speaking of the army...”

His expression naturally relaxes.

“The other group, is probably already being surrounded by the Swiss and German Special Forces as we speak.”

“Special Forces!?”

“Yeah, even if they didn’t bring out the Special Forces, the division in charge of investigating the X-Files is indeed monitoring them.”

“How did it get so big?”

“Because the information leaked out, of course. It’s already reached Confoederatio Helvetica, in other words the Swiss federal authorities.

Even Murata himself was always thinking, which division do they mean by ‘authorities’? But after coming face to face with them, he’s starting to slowly understand.

“The rookie researchers in Germany have heard of it too. It was during World War II, an OOPArt<sup>[7]</sup> the Nazis were desperately searching for showed up in Bodensee Lake...”

Murata tries his hardest to suppress the laughter bubbling up.

“Rumors online even said that the thing has a really long tailfin. I’m guessing in a few weeks, there will be rumors of a red-eyed Bossie that shows up at night or a Boden water-man that leave behind huge footprints.”

“How scary!”

“To distract the enemy attention, this can’t be helped. If everyone were focused on the ‘Mirror’s Depth’ in ‘Bodensee Lake’, there will be fewer people obstructing us here.”

“But...”

The pediatrician who was once this high school’s psychological counselor a long time ago, starts pulling at the hair he tied behind his head. Since he’s a perpetual optimist, it was very rare to see him with such an obvious expression of uneasiness. Like Murata, he seems unwilling to fight on the offensive.

“If the relevant authorities found out, they would definitely sent an expert in to interrupt. Then wouldn’t Shibuya JUNIOR and Abigail be the only ones in hot water? If one of the sides actually does bring ‘Mirror’s Depth’ out of the water...”

“That’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not there.”

Since he didn’t get any reaction, he repeats the same words. Finally he sees infinite laughlines extend in all directions behind those outdated frames, and those long, narrow eyes turn wide.

“You’re saying... the Box isn’t there?”

“That’s right.”

“Not in the lake?”

“Yup!”

“But, back then the one who said the Box had sunk into the lake, was you...”

“I said that, yes.”

Murata can’t help but smile wickedly at his companion opposite him, eyes wide and mouth hanging.

“I said that, I did indeed say that. The Box... ‘Mirror’s Depth’ has sunk to the depths of the water where no one can reach it, and I was the one who personally sunk it. Technically the person who did it wasn’t me, but that French doctor who could not trust anyone. However, the place isn’t the lake.”

With his mouth wide open, Rodriguez points at Murata with his fingers, so surprised he can’t even ask. No wonder, because no one knew about this somewhat upsetting truth until now, the person involved and Murata, who inherited his soul, never leaked it out.

“Instead it’s in the bottom of the sea, we just passed over it, too!”

“You say we just passed it, don’t tell me it’s in the Pacific Ocean--!?”

“Mn, I don’t remember the exact location either. After all, to him, that was

something unexpected.”

“I... I don’t really understand, Ken! Can you explain it to me step-by-step, slowly? Ah, you can ignore Matthew, don’t worry about him. Matthew, this conversation is top secret, if the news got out we will lose the war! Alright, Ken, it’s fine now!”

“Understood.”

Murata imitates his protector from before he was born, dragging out his reply, “Understood—” Then he crosses his arms in front of his chest, his entire back pressed against the seat, so he can feel the tremor of the car better.

“The ancestor of my soul... To save time, I’ll call him that. After all, it’s annoying to count how many generations ago it was. Anyway it’s someone whose fragments remain my records, from a long~ time ago.”

He purposely chose the term ‘records’, though he isn’t sure if the other person noticed.

“Putting aside whether or not he’s the first generation, in any case I’m talking about that person whose hair was so long it got annoying, the person people call the sage, have you heard that he took two of the four Boxes... and flew over to Earth with them under his armpits?”

“I-I heard of it.”

“After that my ancestors repeatedly missed the location of the Box because they were born in the wrong place, or horrible environments kept them unaware of their true identities, so they refused to admit that they brought something here no matter what. But there are still some excellent ancestors who understood everything, and watched the Boxes closely.”

“Just like you?”

“Ah, ha! Just saying, no matter how you praise me, I can’t return the favor, y’know. As you can see, I’m only carrying a plastic bag and my passport. But you can’t really blame that Frenchman, Henry Regent, all I can say is he was unlucky, and couldn’t locate both Boxes, that’s why... And this is just a guess, when Abby’s great-grandmother’s grandmother... Confusing, right? Anyway, it was the treasure hunter Hazel Graves that miraculously got both Boxes. One of them,

‘Mirror’s Depth’, was found in West Asia and then entrusted to an art gallery in Australia, but then a dictator heard of it and intercepted it. However, all these are just deductions, okay?”

The pediatrician’s round eyes went back to their normal size, looks like he’s finally regained his composure.

“Mn, about Abby’s great-grandmother, right? In other words, the founder of the museum, April Graves recovered the ‘Mirror’s Depth’ that she heard about from Bob... it should be the Box called ‘Mirror’s Depth’, and then she sank it into Bodensee to prevent it from being used on the battlefield, right? The ones helping her then were her partner-- the flight genius and her husband. The last-last-owner of my soul, Henry Regent tagged along. But Regent didn’t trust.”

“...Didn’t trust who?”

“Rather than saying he didn’t trust ‘who’, it’s better to say he didn’t trust everything. I only dare to say this as his descendant, but he was a very pitiful person, afraid to trust anyone, suspicious of anything and everything. Although it was a bad trait to have, in a way he was a victim too. Honestly, I feel this system is very cruel, and the person who thought it up is a bastard with no blood and tears.”

Rodriguez wanted to say ‘I know who that person is’, but he doesn’t in the end. Talking about who the founder of Shin Makoku is while on Earth is completely meaningless.

“Regent carried too many memories on his shoulders, but he didn’t dare to tell family or friends about it, so he was always alone. On the surface he has the glorious title of a doctor, and is friendly to everyone, but inside he’s always been lonely and scared. He even wondered, does he have psychological problems? Why must he protect the Boxes? What should he do? How should he find ridiculous Boxes he can’t even be sure exist? And he has to protect them from falling into others’ hands? Besides, is any of this real? These should be the common symptoms of someone with mental problems. And the past memories, personalities, history, the Boxes and all that, could very likely be a country of imagination that he made up on his own. Of course he would be troubled,

because I was too, and I started when I was three!"

"Ken matured so young—"

"Mn, but when I was four or five, Shibuya and you, doctor, showed up in front of me, so I had no time to trouble over whether I was lucky or unlucky."

Besides, all those different examples were prepared long before he was born as Murata Ken. Examples of those who were troubled, those who weren't troubled, those who lost their minds and sank into insanity from their suspicions before they could be troubled. Should they tell everyone around them, or make up something and forget about it? Should they accept this burden and live on? Or reject it, seal it somewhere deep in their memories, and try to forget about this unhappy ending? Regent only remembered half of the past, but Murata got every single record, unaltered and unabridged.

Which part of which life to use, which person he should imitate to live happily, the answers left by his ancestors carry infinite possibilities.

"If Regent could have known Bob, maybe his life would have been a bit easier. But that doesn't mean they're the same type of person. After all they originated from different places, and he never opened out his heart to anyone. You can see that Henry Regent had no friends. He was different from me, he didn't know how to find the heart of the problem."

The pediatrician asks carefully,

"So Regent didn't trust anything... Since he didn't trust anything, what did he do?"

"He took the Box away."

Even if it's said in English, it can't become a cold joke. Murata smiles bitterly, raising his chin high to ease the pressure on the back of his head,

"At the end of World War II, he brought the Box that was once at the bottom of the lake up again and took it away. Just because he couldn't trust, not that he didn't trust April and her husband, but he felt that it was impossible the army would never find the Box. He didn't trust that anything in life could go so well."

"They went through so much to hide it, and he actually brought it back up

again... But you say he took away the Box, yet there can't be a lot of places to hide it without drawing attention, right? Where on earth did he keep it?"

"Hm, I can't say either. Sinking it into the sea may have been his initial plan, or it could have been an unexpected accident. Or maybe he intended to keep it by his side the whole time, and keep an eye on it while at sea."

"Ah~ You're right. If it was kept in the cabin as a ship doctor's personal belongings, it would be harder to find than leaving it on land. Plus he travelled a lot, I see—"

Jose Rodriguez mumbles to himself while holding up his glasses, using those fingers with joints as obvious as sticks to rub his eyelids. There's weariness in the corners of his eyes, a bit out of place with his usual cheerful Mexican image.

"In the end, it still sank into the bottom of the sea."

"Rather than saying it sank, it'd be more accurate to say it 'was sunk'."

"Eh?"

"The civilian boat he boarded as a ship doctor, was accidentally bombed one of their own."

Rodriguez doesn't say anything after an "Ah...", closing his eyes tightly and resting his head on the back of the seat. His ten fingers are interlinked and resting on his stomach, his lips slanting in grief, as though the one who died in that explosion was his own friend.

Once the conversation dies down, it suddenly becomes silent in the car. Maybe because he can't stand the wordless atmosphere, Matthew Orson in the driver's seat turns on the radio. A cacophony of music erupts from the speakers, singing of despair towards the world in fluent English.

Just like he did a long time ago, the doctor puts his hand on the knee of his young counseling patient, using those fingers with joints as obvious as sticks to rub his eyes.

"You remembered the memories from that moment, didn't you?"

The eyelids over his eyes can't stop trembling.

"It's inside you."

“That’s right.”

With that short answer, Murata’s gaze drifts out of the window. All the trees are dressed in green, all he sees is beautiful scenery. Inside his heart he thinks, no matter what, before he could tell if this was the city, the cars had already crossed the state border on the high-speed freeway. The scenery he’s looking at is no longer Boston.

“Say it. Ken, tell me about it.”

“That feeling is very strange, really hard to describe with words.”

“But I still want to hear you talk about it.”

“It feels very calm.”

He tries to bring out those memories, and it’s as though something bright and colorful appears in front of his eyes, quietly, with a larger emphasis on the color blue, a beautiful image like a kaleidoscope.

“His body was facing upwards, looking up to see the sky fall down on him. But he wasn’t in the sky, instead he was in the sea, so he was looking at the sky through the seawater. It could have been daytime then, the seawater was bright and blue, sparkling even, he was sinking down as he looked up at the seawater. Not a shred of pain, or anything like sorrow, because he didn’t have family that would grieve for him.

He knows in that moment, many people died. He experienced examples of streams of thought interrupted by explosions, and then the world turning suddenly black in front of his eyes. There were also times it was like a child’s dream, and he kept seeing things that were impossible in real life. But Regent’s end was especially quiet, probably only the bottom of the sea can bring that absolute a silence.

“He looked up, and quite a few people were falling with him. Although they were falling continuously, they fell slowly, their limbs still moving gracefully. There probably wouldn’t be a term like this back then, but it looked like they were walking in space. The women’s hair floated in the waves like seaweed, sometimes becoming red or orange fireworks. But that was on the other end of the screen of water, so the pictures were blurred and soft, and felt very

beautiful. This feeling is very strange, not upsetting or painful, just slowly sinking into the clear, bright depths of the water."



With that, Murata sighs deeply.

“After that he should have died, that must be it.”

“Thank you for telling me. Sorry, forcing you to remember those things, it must really hurt, huh?”

“It doesn’t hurt at all, but it feels so strange... What do you think, doctor, is it worth referencing in your medical studies?”

“Even if I wanted to use it as a reference, your story won’t work on anyone other than yourself.”

Rodriguez takes his hand off Murata’s knee, looking into his face,

“Besides, Ken isn’t sick, so I never used your condition as a part of my medical studies.”

“Is that so?”

Murata interlinks his fingers and puts them behind his head, then stretches his spine hard. His gaze moves from the ceiling to the front seat, then to his feet. The Orson boy must have ridden this sort of car before, right? It’s not too clean inside, and there’s even a donut paper bag scrunched into a ball in the corner.

Outside the car is even a cute pink and light green combination that kids should like.

Most people think that kids like pink and light green. Most adults think that kids never grow up.

“I see.”

“That’s right, I never thought you were sick from the very start. Back then you were just a kid who couldn’t pronounce properly, but when you saw my nameplate you suddenly called me Josie, y’know. Meaning you knew your ABCs —”

Distracted, Murata thinks, “Why are my glasses fogging up suddenly”, but no matter how he rubs with his fingers he can’t rub it away, so he quickly gets back to the main point.

“...’Mirror’s Depth’ should be lying somewhere deep within the Pacific Ocean,

together with the body of Henry Regent. It should be impossible to bring it up again.”

“In that case, it is rather more comforting to know it’s in there.”

“That’s right. As long as a marine expert doesn’t use deep-sea radars to look for sunken treasure, there won’t be a problem.”

“That way, the heir of the elite treasure hunters—Abigail Graves won’t find anything in Bodensee Lake no matter how she dives... On the contrary, I kinda feel bad for Bob and the others.”

“If they want to look for it, let them look for it.”

The pediatrician narrows his eyes, staring at him intently.

“Why, doctor, are you unhappy about something?”

“I’m not unhappy, I’m just wondering how you became so crafty—”

“I would rather prefer it if you said I’m someone who shouldn’t be messed with.”

Murata smiles brightly, as though saying ‘no such thing, I’m a model student, you know’. Even if he purposely tries to act more decent, his cover has been blown from the start.

“That’s why I’m saying, the problem we have now is the other Box, ‘Inferno on the Tundra’.”

“But that one—”

As usual, Rodriguez drags out his last syllable when asking.

“—was under Hazel’s care, and eventually burned down together with the house for some reason, right?”

“That’s what it looks like on the surface, but it’s full of mystery.”

Back then Hazel Graves was getting ready to renovate the house she just got into a gallery of her collection. She even personally brought in a few of the most precious items, things even her family rarely got to see.

And ‘that’ was one of them—the Box identified as ‘Inferno on the Tundra’.

She gave the other Box she found—‘Mirror’s Depth’ to the art salesman in Australia for safekeeping, while keeping ‘Inferno on the Tundra’ by her side.

That fire that attacked the Graves house burnt even the pillars down to the ground, until all that was left was coal and ash. The assumption was that she died in the fire as well, but there was no body in her coffin. Back then the people who attended the funeral, who grieved and wept for Hazel Graves, didn’t know that in the coffin covered with flowers and soil, there was only her clothes and personal items.

“...But I suspect she went there.”

“Went where?”

“There.”

Rodriguez doesn’t ask where ‘there’ is. He’s a mazoku born and bred on Earth, so even if someone told him there’s a world completely different to this one, he can’t quite imagine what kind of a place that is. But he can understand the existence of ‘that world’, and he can accept it.

“So this can explain it?”

“To be precise, there is no other way to explain it.”

The crime scene investigators in 1903 couldn’t come to the truth. Their conclusion was the heat was so extreme it destroyed everything, from the building to the items in the house to the body—That was the explanation the police and fire brigade gave her family.

“That explanation can’t convince me. After all, that wasn’t a drug factory or a petrol station, just a normal civilian house, so no matter how high the heat, there should be some flesh or bone left. If there was an explosion then that would be another matter altogether, but a normal fire wouldn’t make someone vanish without a trace.”

“Well, about that... The incident happened over seventy years ago~~”

“However, if Hazel flew over to that world with the Box, everything can be explained. Once things transcend science, reality can never catch up.”

He tries to use the tips of his toes to kicks aside the donut bag, and the paper

bounces off under the front seat, vanishing. But this only means it's vanished from his sight, and even if he can't see it, it's still right there, hiding in a dark place under the seat. Matter doesn't just suddenly disappear.

"...Anyway, let's meet Mr Hobart first."

Rodriguez nods lightly to approve Murata's words, their conversation ending with that. Only the radio keeps repeating passionate words. Soon, though, Rodriguez still can't help but say,

"B-but... You said it's not there, so the Box isn't in Switzerland!?"

The pediatrician presses his hand to his chest, his brow furrowed as he laughs, "In that case, why did Ken purposely act so nervous in front of Bob!? You had him hook, line and sinker... I can't believe you actually acted all this out, what a naughty boy you are—"

The pediatrician brings up the incident at the KTV.

Calling him 'a naughty boy' isn't just rude, it obviously means he treats him as a child. But affected by the mood, Murata raps the car window glass with his fist and laughs,

"I wasn't acting. That wasn't acting, I wasn't in the mood, either, I really panicked. Because Shibuya disappeared, and without a trace. This was my first time feeling so panicked since kindergarten."

"Panic? You, panicked?"

"When you ask that and sound so surprised, it's like you're saying I don't have emotions."

"Nah, that's not what I meant."

The doctor's smile suddenly disappears, and he says, completely seriously, "I'm really worried."

"Mn—Because Shibuya always does things so rashly."

"I'm not talking about Shibuya, I'm talking about you."

His expression is that of a mother who just got interested in parenting, yet has to send her kid to kindergarten. Worried for him, reluctant to leave him, and yet

confident that he can pass this test.

Murata can't help but avert his gaze, looking at the car ceiling and sighing deeply. Then he relaxes his body, tilting his head towards the window glass.

"If you're not hungry then take a nap! We'll be spending close to two hours in the car, anyway."

"You want me to take a nap in this car with the god awful music?"

"Mn, I'll call you once we reach Freeport."

"I'll never get to sleep."

But it seems there was nothing to worry about.

In a few minutes, he descends into a deep slumber. The young singer continues to vent his emotions, singing of despair towards this world.

## References

1. ↑ A talent agency founded by Ishihara Yujiro. There's a mention of Shouri wanting Yuuri to join the company in the short story at the end of this volume lol
2. ↑ The nickname of famous Japanese composer Gita Tarou
3. ↑ lit. 'sea woman', Japanese divers who collect pearls.
4. ↑ A character in a Japanese children's show, a green dinosaur that lives in the South
5. ↑ A character in a Japanese children's show, a snow monster that lives near the North Pole
6. ↑ A book by Tsuboi Sakae, about a teacher and 132 students. Later adapted into a movie ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty-Four\\_Eyes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twenty-Four_Eyes))
7. ↑ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Out-of-place\\_artifact](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Out-of-place_artifact)

# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3

Many pebbles kept falling, they hit my forehead and it hurt.

I covered my head with both my arms and got down. I pressed my forehead against the ground, my pose was as if I was prostrating. I don't know for whom or for what.

I stayed like that for less than three seconds.

While talking about being assertive, even before three seconds passed after receiving the wound on my cheek, unable to bear the fear I got down on the ground. Something unknown was coming to attack, it could have been a bird, it could have been a bat, or something even more dangerous, it could have been a ferocious animal. Even so I can't confirm it myself. Even though both my eyes are wide open, darkness is the only thing that is spreading in front of my eyes. I don't even know their number or whether they'll attack from the front or from the side. If I were to put it bluntly, I couldn't even confirm whether it existed in reality or not.

The darkness was increasing my fear.

Losing to my fear I got down on the ground and wanted to let the attacking creature get past. The trembling didn't subside. If I wasn't dehydrated I could have even shed tears and would have been crying in a loud voice.

I waited for a long time. But nothing happened.

Although in reality it could have been just a few minutes, but to me it felt as if I was waiting forever. But even without the wind grazing my cheek or any pain, there wasn't even any flapping sound in my ears. Nothing happened.

I fearfully resumed my breathing, let go of the fingers holding my head and raised my face up.

"Cre..."

Being completely thirsty, if I don't squeeze out my voice I can't talk.

"Yuuri"

Saralegui who seemed to have been near the wall came closer.

Along with the footsteps firmly stepping on the pebbles, I can feel the warmth floating in the air. He squatted down in front of me and before asking me if I was alright, he touched my cheek with his left hand. His fingertips were moist and cold, it smelled like damp soil.

"You're bleeding."

After that he brought his face very close to me. When I thought that his nose hit my cheek, he stroked my wound with something warm. With that peculiarly wet sensation, I understood that he had licked me.

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"I see, that's good."

It was not at all good for me.

I had indeed lost my eyesight, but my hearing and sense of smell were supposed to be normal. I still have ears and a nose. I can still pick up heat and other signs.

Even so other than the first hit, I couldn't feel anything. There's not even the smell or any signs of the beast around. There are no traces left of it.

"Was it a bird?"

"Who knows. To be honest... I only saw it for a fraction of a second and then ended up closing my eyes. It will be troublesome if they peck me and I lose my eyesight."

When I repeated lose your eyesight eh, Saralegui behaved a little like a spoiled child.

"But it went away. It's alright now, Yuuri."

"But."

After asking 'really!?' I looked around my own knees. Of course I can't see anything even if I turn around my head. However, at the same time there isn't any scent nor any feathers left around. I spread out my fingers and stroked around on the ground, the only thing that hits my palm are many small stones. I couldn't find a single feather of the animal that doesn't move in a flock.

"How can that be, this is strange."

I even touched my right cheek where it was bleeding. The wound that has not closed up hurt a little.

"Strange? What's the matter?"

"Except for this location..."

"It avoided you and went past you from both the sides."

"That can't be, it didn't even make any flapping sound, I didn't even feel any wind. It would even give off some smell right? Since it's an animal after all! But I didn't feel anything. It just hit me at first, and then there was nothing."

"Isn't that because you bent down?"

"How could that be!"

As a habit from when I could see, I opened up both my hands in front of my face, I searched if there was even a single feather wrapped around my fingers. Of course it was useless.

"I know that I'm hanging my head down. Fearing, prostrating in front of an animal who can't even understand, if a flock of birds pass through such a narrow passageway I would know, I would know! Since I still have my ears and nose! Don't I!?"

"That's right normally."

"Then why..."

Since an unnatural amount of time passed before he replied, he stood up and most probably while looking down at me said.

"Because you're not in your right mind right now."

I heard his words as if it was a sentence being passes on a criminal.

"Although it goes without saying that you were hurt, you've lost your sanity due to exhaustion and agitation. It's only natural, on top of being tired from walking throughout, there's no water or food either. Being faced with the tragedy of losing a comrade. In such an extreme situation, even if it was me, it would be difficult to stay normal. That's why without even recovering your eyesight, your other senses have become unreliable. Even though so many creatures went past your side, you say that you didn't notice it at all. Yuuri, you are tired. Blaming and cornering yourself."

Saralegui placed his hand on my head, and with his slim fingers brushed through my hair. This posture is exactly like a lamb asking for God's forgiveness.

"There's no need to blame yourself for such a man."

"Are you saying that... I'm going insane."

"I didn't say that. Just that, you are losing your sanity a bit."

"It's the same."

Something has gone insane. Something.

Just one word was going round in my brain. I'm feeling dizzy. As if on the verge of collapsing from a heat stroke, my body trembled. An unbearable pain came from within my skull as if something had hit me, from the head it went to my neck and down my back.

I'm going crazy, I'm not sane. Definitely something has happened. If not then there's no way I wouldn't sense what happened just. Encountering a swam of animals coming at high speed, there's no way that there wouldn't be any injuries.

If it really happened.

Unable to straighten my body, my trembling increases rapidly and when I noticed it I had fallen on the hard ground. I had collapsed sideways with on my left arm, unable to move like that I stayed still. My eyes are open. Both of them wide open. But nothing reflected in them.

"Yuuri."

Slowly pulling my knees near my stomach, rounding my back, I tried to become

smaller. I tried to expose as little as possible to this world.

"I understand what you're thinking about."

The voice directly falls on my ears. Sara bent his body as if he was covering me and sat on the passageway made up of a mixture of mud and stones. His knees are touching the nape on my neck. Without even getting tired of it he played around with my hair and pushed the remaining that was on my cheek to the back of my ear. As if he was always doing it. His gesture of scooping out the blonde that's close to white with his slender fingers and gently putting it behind his ears looked very elegant.

"You're think that it would be nice if everything was a dream."

Instead of going through my eardrums, those words directly soak into my brain.

"You're thinking that it would be nice if everything was just a dream...even leaving the country, even to have meeting me in Shou Shimaron, even coming to Seisakoku with me, you're thinking that it would be nice if it was a dream. Even being separated from Lord Weller, even that guard dying, you're thinking that it would be better if everything was just a dream, right? You're still in your home town, within your warm bed, nothing misfortunate has happened. You're just having a bad dream, a nightmare. However, no matter how sad the dream is, it's nothing more than a dream. Someone sleeping next to you will shake your shoulder and wake you up."

Someone will shake my shoulder.

They will wake me up.

"All this is just a nasty nightmare you're having at dawn. Isn't that right?"

All this is just something I'm seeing at dawn.

"If you're thinking of that, then it's fine to consider it a dream."

A nasty dream.

"You can stay with me till someone wakes you up."

Someone.

...cha... n, Ken...chan.

"Ken-chan!"

"Aa, uwa, what? Am I late!?"

The one who was calling was Rodriguez. Murata jumped up completely astonished. Maybe the air conditioning was too strong, there's sweat at the back of his shirt. His pulse fastened and it was hard to breathe. As if he was just sprinting with all his might.

"You scared me, I thought someone was calling me in my dream."

"I'm the one whose surprised. I thought you were having a nightmare since you suddenly got up and screamed something like being late. Did you have a dream about your school?"

"No, that's not it... ah."

What was outside the window was a spectacle a hundred and eighty degrees different from Boston. The red cobblestone townscape was beautiful, even though it's new it made him feel nostalgic. There were no high-rise buildings nearby, the town was surrounded by greenery. It had the impression of a resort.

"Huh? Where is this?"

"It's Boston. It's the Freeport of Maine. We just passed by President Papa's<sup>[1]</sup> summer house."

"It's too far to see anything anyways."

"Maybe."

On a plot deep within a wide lawn, there was a white and red building. The roof is in a lower position than the forest behind it. Just from being named port, the smell of salt sometimes mixes in the wind.

"Since the work finishes at 5 o' clock, the meeting place with them is here."

"The cafe here has a reputation for being delicious!"

Olsen, who got down earlier said that with pride. Even Murata got out of the car and stretched his back. All the muscles throughout his body had been coagulated, made a sound that even others could hear as the loosened up.

The man who had promised to meet them, will he really bring "that" along.

The ashes or possible the pieces.

An old record plays classical music on a vintage radio, a the music is as if a soprano singer is singing a soprano, it's flowing somewhere into a distance. If the events until now were my dream and this music is reality, I wonder if it's a makeshift alarm clock.

Someone is singing. In my head, someone.

That person is looking at the sky, the clear daytime sky. However in the heavens which were supposed to be a deep sea blue with pure white clouds, without even an ounce of white or blue, there's only a curtain is spreading. I understood. That was the color of splashing waves mixing with the sea water I saw when I went to the open seas in the southern seas.

That was the color of the sea and waves mixing. I raise my voice so that I could tell her.

She answered 'Is that so?'. But I can't see her. Although I'm hearing with my own ears and seeing with my own eyes, at the same time they are her ears and eyes.

She says is that so? I didn't know, since I've never seen it. But this is the color of my sky. There's a slightly different color at the center, right? That's the sun. It's most probably pure white. That's what I call white. And look at that.

I turn my neck as told. Half of my field of vision became extremely grey. It moves along with the wind that's hitting my cheek. I got it, it's a tree right?

She laughs. She clapped her hands saying you can be very happy, that's right! There's a tree over there. It's been there for nearly a hundred years now. Light is fluttering from within the leaves, right? To me the tree is this color. Even though

everyone says that it's green. Spring has the smell of flowers, summer smells like life. Autumn smells like withering death. Winter has the smell of sleep.

Smell of sleep? I ask while tucking both my hands in my pocket. Everything gets hazy, I can't see anything clearly. But I'm not anxious. I wonder why.

She laughs again. You won't understand that unless you sleep. But I'll tell you one thing. If you don't know the smell of sleep that means that you're not sleeping.

You're not dreaming.

...not dreaming.

I'm not dreaming.

"This is reality."

I can feel a burning pain in my chest, with the left hand that had been pinned down below my body, I grabbed on to the cause. The demon stone that Hazel had returned had become hot, much more than my body temperature. On the other hand the gorgeous ring that was stuck to my pinky finger was becoming as cold as if it was freezing.

Since I took my hand out, my body inclined, I ended up being in the position that almost looked like I was in Saralegui's lap looking above. Although the ceiling of the underground passageway was pitch black just like the path ahead or the one we came from, if I watch carefully I noticed the irregularity in color.

Among the black that spreads all around, the direction my right hand was pointing at became lighter little by little. I follow the changes my turning my neck, the black slightly turned into grey, and in the grey there's a spot that turns close to white.

"Over there..."

There's the sun.

Although I tried to say that, it's too dry that it couldn't turn into words.

"Yuuri?"

I must go. Even this couldn't turn into words. That's why I kept quiet and with

the help of my elbow raised the upper half of my body and bending my both my knees I leaned sideways. Although I was finally able to stand, my feet staggered and I was in no condition to keep my body upright. As if I hadn't moved for many hours, I felt as if I had become a horse who had forgotten how to walk.

Even so, I somehow searched for the wall with my right hand and started walking towards the white spot overhead.

"Are you still going to walk? Can you walk?"

After coughing many times, I was finally able to let out a hoarse voice.

"I can't just keep sleeping, I must get out of here. E... even you."

Since I forced myself to speak, a pain ran down my throat as if it would crack.

"You won't be able to walk if you carry me."

Due to my sharpened senses my ears definitely heard the sound of Saralegui being amazed and cooing. From that moment on, his tone was mixed with dissatisfaction and pride, his friendly tone disappeared.

"You're a troublesome guy."

"...what did you say?"

"Although I was waiting for you to be unable to move, you just don't collapse. Do you plan to walk on your willpower or are you planning to proceed crawling"

Along with the sound of rustling of clothes, a faint smell of sweat reached me. He even sweats... I think vaguely. As if it doesn't suit him. Speaking of which, he's talking right now. From that delicate and gentle look, I can't believe such words are coming out of those lips that look like petals that are just about to open.

"The moment that man died, I thought it would go well, that I could finally corner you. Even so you tenaciously stand up. You won't become hopeless."

"...not that...easily."

"But he died. Because of you."

That's right, it was my fault.

"And to my convenience you even lost your eyesight. To have come this far any person would have become weak, even though I thought this time for sure."

You're still going to try your best. Wow, I see, you're splendid Yuuri. You don't try to rely on me at all."

"Rely."

I rest my right shoulder on the rocks that were protruding from the wall. I can no longer stand properly on my own. If I advance, I'll be slower than a turtle. I'm dehydrated, I vomit, collapse, I even saw an hallucination. My hands and legs are trembling, I can't even speak properly. Even my ability to think properly and even my eyesight won't return.

I lost Josak.

Can anything be more misfortunate than that? How much more miserable does he want to see me.

Even so he spoke.

"You won't break. You really possess a splendid and troublesome mind."

"If I did..."

A splendid heart? What will happen if I did possess something so fine? Would I be able to escape from here in one shot. Or if I could manipulate time with these hands, would I be able to rewind the time till before I made that mistake.

But what is the reality. Speaking of what I can do, I can talk, cough, take a breadth, and repeat all of that.

Indeed maybe even Saralegui noticed that part, he said in a sympathetic tone.

"Looks like your body is at its limit. And that is right Yuuri, how long do you think you haven't drunk anything? Although you might not know for how many days, but you haven't put anything in your mouth for five days."

"It's the same for you."

"You thought it was the same for me?"

I wonder what's so funny, the young king of Shou Shimaron held his body and laughed.

"You think I'm the same?"

Maybe the hair he had tied became undone, it vertically cuts through the air.

He grabbed my wrist, opened my palm and dropped a small quantity of something at the center. When it touches the skin it spreads sideways, it's something that doesn't have any shape. Although I curl my fingers in order to grasp it, the only thing that remains on my palm is a moist wet veil.

...it's wet?

"...water?"

"That's right, although it's mixed with soil."

Although I hurriedly brought it to my mouth, when I tried to sip there was only little mud left in my hands. With the face of a fool who dirtied his chin, I draw myself closer to Saralegui. Desire must have been sparkling in my eyes which could not see.

"Wh..why do have water?"

"Calm down Yuuri. You're dirty."

He wiped my lips with his thumb. The moment I realized his body is getting closer, even without an impulse to stop myself, I grabbed on to Saralegui. It's no good, I shouldn't do such a thing! To attack someone for water is not something a human would do. Isn't it on par with an animal. Even if I scream inside my head, I could not control my instinct with rationality.

"Oops."

However someone who can see can easily evade the hands of someone who can't see. He flipped a pebble and jumped back, I stumbled and hit against the wall.

"You couldn't see and were having nightmares. I went to drink water quite a number of times but you didn't notice it"

"...How can that be... there wasn't any sound of a river at all."

"That's because it's not flowing. At times there were traces of wells contaminated by red soil at the corners of the path. Your ears couldn't hear it, your nose couldn't smell anything other than the damp soil"

"Give it to me!"

Although I spread out my hands relying on the voice without learning from my experience, I can't get a hold of him impatiently trying to sense his accurate position. My hands just cut through the air in vain.

"Give me dammit! It should be fine if you share a little right!?"

"Share? I see."

Saralegui said.

"Although having collapsed, if you would rely on me, cling onto me then I thought I would help you, but when it comes to you no matter how long I wait for you just won't behave in that manner. It can't be helped, Yuuri. I'll share the water with you."

His voice is as beautiful as always.

"It's no fun if you die."

Carelessly declaring that, he placed his finger on my chin.

"Open your mouth."

The water mixed with mud was poured, from my tongue to my throat, the moisture slowly penetrates. Although it's lukewarm, it's still cold enough.

"You want more?"

It's not enough. Not enough at all.

"This is, too little..."

"You're being greedy, Yuuri."

I caught his shoulder and tried to jolt it but failed. Unable to support my body after leaving the wall, I took to my knees as if dragging just like that. I held onto to his waist, I rubbed my face against his stomach. And slowly shook my head.

"It's not enough."

"It's alright, I'll give you more. Well then, let's do this, if you can give the correct answer to my question, I'll let you drink as much as you like."

"Why won't you give it to me immediately, why won't you give it to me immediately? If there is more then... more..."

In order to make me silent, he placed his hand on my mouth. The tips of his fingers were wet. I even licked them. If it's water then anything is fine.



"Listen, I have an interesting story. Long ago, here in Seisakoku a woman gave birth to twins. It's nothing special since there are a lot of twins among Shinzoku. What was different than the rest was that her husband was an injured soldier, a stranger who had drifted from the mainland"

"What's with you, you can hear that anywhere. More importantly"

I grabbed Saralegui's clothes. The nails jammed with dirt impatiently scratch at his clothes.

I know the story about a demon who fell in love with a human whose only merit was his sword, even the story of a demon who made ties with a human girl in the land he was exiled to. From an amateur's point of view what was troublesome was their romantic feelings. Not my heart.

"It's interesting from here on, Yuuri. Although the woman became a mother, among the children she had given birth to, one immediately raised his first cry, the other one didn't raise his first cry even after half a day. It was half dead. What do you think the woman did?"

".....lamented in sorrow.....?"

"Wrong"

"Why? She must have been sad!"

Sara shoot his head and with his fingers combed my bangs upwards.

"She did not feel sad. Hugging both her sons, she ran to the grave of the ancestors. She galloped on a horse on the path that was cursed and could not be passed by the living. How brave of her!"

"To bury the child?"

"That's not it. She wasn't a woman who would be satisfied with just that"

"What else can she do. She must have wanted to let it sleep in peace, that's parental love, what else....."

"Don't be in such a rush"

Saralegui's little finger and thumb caught my temple. The tip of his finger nails graze the corner of my eyes. Feeling the pain my line of sight..... although I can't see, if I divert it, there was that white spot to the right skies of a faraway companion. It's the white that that person called the sun.

What am I doing?

Even if it's for water, flattering this disgusting guy, depending on him. Isn't this exactly what Saralegui wanted. That ruler, while reaching my eye socket with his soft finger said.

"To make her still born son rest in peace with the ancestors, that woman was not someone who would be satisfied with just that. She tried to revive her son. By using the God's, the dead's and even her own horyouku"

"If she could do such a thing then....."

Then even I would do that. Anyone would do it!

"The outcome of that, what do you think happened?"

I nod once but still shake my head. It's impossible.

"She cannot do that, she couldn't revive him"

"Correct. Yuuri, where are you facing. Look at me. The dead child wasn't revived, but he wasn't taken away to the world of the dead either. The thing that was left in this world is definitely not alive. Then what happened"

After keeping silent for a moment, he gave the answer himself.

"She ended up making a monster"

As his fingers encroached my eye socket, I reflexively shook his hand off. I felt like I was holding onto life.

"She ended up making monsters, two monsters!"

"Both the children? Why"

"I wonder if I said that both the monsters were her sons. One of them is her son, the baby who was born half dead. But the other one is none other than she herself. Now she has power more than that of a Shizoku's houryoku, she can manipulate the offensive dead at will. Let's just say that he's not as evil as his

mother, she really is a monarch with overwhelming power. Although I don't know what was there in the graves....."

I cannot see a person's face. Not to mention I cannot know the expression on someone's face whose in the dark. But this is the only thing I can easily guess. Right now, more than me who wishes for water, Saralegui making eyes that of a beast.

That's right, what he desires is power.

"It was a harvest more than that of reviving someone!"

".....I wonder"

"Of course it was. Because what she desired more than anything was to have a powerful heir"

And so he is jealous of her.

Of the one who received the power he couldn't.

Of the mother who abandoned him since he didn't possess any houryouku and his brother who obtained the power to surpass him.

"Didn't she just wish to revive it?"

"That couldn't be. There's no way she would wish for normal children found everywhere. She was the woman who didn't even grieve the death of her baby, she even tried to abandon the child who survived since he didn't have any powers"

"That's not it"

I almost answered reflexively. Even though I didn't know about the family situation, even though I had no reason to defend the mother.

"That's not it, Saralegui"

It's useless even if I scold him saying what do you know. I must talk here, when I think that that scene cannot be transmitted to anyone's heart, it makes me feel that keeping quiet is cowardice.

That's why I spoke. Precisely since we are here in the underground in this darkness where there's no light nor even shadow, I thought it is important for

me to remain like my usual self.

"The mother was sad. There's no way she wouldn't be sad. While hugging the babies, she prayed to God crying. That she didn't have anyone other than those children"

Help, please help this child.

O God, why do you want to take away the son from my arms that I was finally blessed with?

I don't have anyone other than these children. Even though I don't have anyone other than you and these children!

The image of her back as young mother kneeled on the ground and burst into tears. As she held the babies in her hands and curled her upper body. It's that dream.

"I saw it"

"You saw, where. You think I'll believe? Such a fake story"

"If your story is true and she did go to the ancestral grave.....if the path that no living being is allowed to pass through is this place, then I saw it. I saw the mother crying. I saw her hugging the babies and mourning"

"That's just a bunch of lies!"

I had a mysterious feeling as I heard Saralegui's clearly agitated voice.

"It's not a lie. The ordinary me had a dream with a deep meaning behind it, I wonder if it was the influence of some movie, even though I don't watch anything other than touching sports. That should settle the matter. But unfortunately this isn't the time for that. Thinking that there was so much drama, this isn't the time to be reasoning with it. I saw it, the mother loved her sons. I saw her crying and saying that she doesn't have anyone other than those children....."

"You're trying to deceive me, it won't be that easy!"

The slender fingers which looked like they couldn't grip anything, hit my chin and lips. I was slammed into the stone wall, my spine shrieked. My adam's apple being squeezed, my breathing stops.

".....Sa, ra.....a"

"If she loved me"

Even though there is no reason, I heard a scream that would turn into a cry anytime.

"Then why did she not give that power to me!?"

"Th....."

At that moment I took action that couldn't be believed. I repelled my opponent's arm from the inside, just like that I held Saralegui's forearms and fixed both his arms, I grabbed his wrist and with my back twisted them.

I wasn't thinking anything with my head. Although I was only thinking that it was getting hard to breathe, maybe it was a conditioned reflex my body moved on its own, I was fastened up the assailant.

Where in the world was I hiding such physical strength and technique, I didn't know that myself. Maybe the mud had some calories in it. It's trying out things, trying to eat things without making a fuss over it.

"Do you wish to have such power!?"

"Ouch"

The slender body in my arms is struggling in pain. I'm doing a horrible thing, although I think of releasing him, but the anger welling up in me from deep within wouldn't allow me to.

"By amazing you mean manipulating the dead right? What is there to get jealous about that, the one who is greedy isn't me but you Sara!"

"Yuuri, it hurts"

"Anyone would wish to have power, even.... me.....*however the power which was not bestowed on us should not exist in this world*"[\[2\]](#)

"Yuuri"

I wonder what this discomfort I feel under my skin is. It's the same bad feeling I had when I was sharing my "eyes". Even though this is my throat and my mouth, I feel like it belongs to someone else's body at the same time. The unpleasant

feeling that the words I spout out are not my own. I remember this. Even when I met the Shizoku for the first time, I fell into the same state.

*"All who possess it shall be eliminated"*

Who are you.

*"By means of death.....they will be eliminated"*

Who is spouting out such a terrible curse!?

"Is that the real you?"

Leaving my bewilderment aside, the king of Small Cimarron responded to this dangerous character. Soft hair rubs off my cheek and he lures me over his shoulder.

"I see, so that was it. If that's the case then we are the same, we can get along well"

"I am.....different....."

"Hey, let's get out of this passageway and head to the royal graves. Without being seen by anyone, without anyone knowing about it. There just like mother and Yelshi..... or we can even get a greater power. There is something definitely there that even the spirits of the ancestors couldn't get their hands on, some mysterious power is hidden there"

I heard the invitation of a snake well.

"Even you might have realized it. There's something in the graves. A treasure that no one in this world could obtain. Isn't it, Yuuri"

"Stop"

Yuuri

"Don't call my name"

"Yuuri!"

However this time it was different than Saralegui's voice. The sound screaming my name came from height above.

When I look back forgetting that I can't see, just below the white that I

thought to be the sun, there was a small red spot. It's a torch, I realized that intuitively, that color was fire.

A person came down through the hole open in the ceiling of the dome.

"Yuuri, are you there?"

"Co....."

There is no need to ask who it is, I can tell by his voice. Even so I asked.

"Conrad?"

"It's me"

The only thing that falls into my eyes is a human form illuminated by the fire. A vague fuzzy orange outline comes running, it's exactly like a thermograph screen.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. But how"

"I'm sorry for being late. Although I had Hazel and her comrades guide me through the desert, we missed out a lot of points where we could overtake. Do you have any injuries anywhere?"

The body temperature I'm used to touches my shoulders as if consoling me.

This is his right palm. The right arm that has nothing to do with the nightmarish scene. It's warmer than his left hand.

"Yuuri"

When I try to reply I mutter a word starting with C inside my mouth, I'm on the verge of tears. If I was an elementary school student I would have cried without holding back. Although I wanted to say don't call me your majesty as usual, at such a time he did not make that mistake.

"I'm not...injured"

"I'm glad, I'll take to on top immediately. By the way"

The end of the word becomes small and I mumble. Speaking of which, there was so much disturbance that he wouldn't have noticed even if I spoke facing him. In the short period of silence he guessed what was happening, in an instant

he changed the words following it into a question.

"What did he do"

He must be asking about Saralegui. Of all things if he sees me, a pacifist doing such twisted thing, he would get suspicious. I thrust away the body with slender physique.

"Take this guy, take Saralegui to the ground first"

"Your majesty, I....."

"No, I'm not saying it out of friendship. We can't have him run away so I'm requesting you. I cannot set this man free. Restraine this guy and put him under surveillance and then come down here once again. Is that fine? Conrad"

"Of course"

Along with a small scream there wind blew in a near the ground, looks like the hands that are used to doing rough things more than me got the nape of his neck, Saralegui is flapping both his legs.

"I won't go, I won't go! I will go to the underground, being covered by sand in the desert is too bothersome"

"Behave yourself if you don't want to be dropped"

"That's right, I don't mind if you accompany us Lord Weller, we will take you along on our journey. If we do that even Yuuri won't be lonely. Isn't that right?"

I am the one who replied to Saralegui's nonsense, it was supposed to be me.

"Unfortunately, **your majesty** Saralegui, I won't listen to **your** advice. And"

For the first time in these five days I let out a sigh of relief, I could finally relax my body.

"I won't accept even a single drop of water from you"

When I leaned on the wall and let my chin down, I was attacked by a pain just like giddiness. I feel like I don't want to move even a single finger.

"Conrad, come back as quick as possible, there's something.....something I need to talk about"

"Yes"

"Return really quickly"

Being bound by a trained professional, he forced his way through even though it wouldn't work. He was a little excited.

"What are you going to talk about, is it a secret ? What sort of private conversation ? Ah, could it be that"

He let out a hysterical laugh.

"That you let that man die ?"

## References

1. ↑ He's referring to George H. W. Bush
2. ↑ Yuuri starts speaking as if he's in his maou mode (uesama mode). I've made all those sentences italic

# Chapter 4

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Different countries, have different types of fanatics.

That was my first thought when I met the informant.

Rather than saying we met, it would be better to explain that we didn't introduce ourselves at an official event, and instead happened to bump into each other hurriedly in the car park.

Although it's already working hours, the informant hasn't shown up in the coffee shop as agreed. Murata, Rodriguez and Matthew Orson have their chins on their hands at the table with the white cloth, waiting impatiently. Murata has already finished his third cup of café au lait, the pediatrician with a sweet tooth has already eaten chocolate mousse, cheesecake and tiramisu.

Just as the man who adores sweets says, "I'm a bit bored, lemme call for a piece of pie"—

The customer who runs in from the main road tells the shop employee agitatedly that a serious fire has started outside.

"Rather than calling it a fire, it should count as a huge blaze, right?[\[1\]](#)"

"A blaze? That's bad, is anyone hurt?"

The trendily-dressed waitress pales. Although it's a normal day, there are quite a few tourists here from Boston to shop. A manmade blaze could damage an entire city's reputation, and in the eyes of tourists, it could be a one-hit kill.

"No, no, no, it's in S.S.BONE."

"Ah, is that it."

The atmosphere in the shop calms down, until even Murata heaves a sigh of relief, thinking it's no big deal. After all they only got such limited information, he was just particularly sensitive because it has something to do with fire. But once everyone heard that, they look so distinctly relieved, it's quite a sight for the

outsiders.

A name that can put everyone at ease just like that, exactly what kind of a company is this ‘S.S.BONE’? Murata and Rodriguez are just about to ask the alleged Boston local, Matthew Orson, when they realize there’s something wrong with him. His expression looks like he just swallowed an entire hard-boiled egg.

“What’s wrong with Matthew?”

“Eeh, S.S.BONE doesn’t seem to be good news!”

“Eh? I was wondering, is the name a rip-off of L.L.BEAN<sup>[2]</sup>? Or does it have something to do with stocks?”

“Ken, that’s not called ripping off, that’s called ‘great minds think alike’. They obviously have the same ideas.”

“I have a problem with that name as well, too bad it’s in the grey area. But more importantly, S.S.BONE is where our informant Hobart works.”

“Which means he could be caught in the blaze! Why didn’t you say so earlier, Matthew—”

And so the entire party hurries to the scene, only to see the BONE company facilities burning brightly. To be exact, it was the large skeleton art piece right outside the company burning, sparks flying everywhere. If you ignore the fact that it’s five meters tall, the scaled model together with tendons and flesh looks just like an outdoor cremation.

“It looks more like a BBQ. Anyway, the thing damaged is a piece of art, if you think of it as someone else’s problem, then the fire blazing in the evening is really quite beautiful!”

But they can’t think of it as someone else’s problem.

“The person is located.”

Matthew, who is familiar with our target, has found him.

The informant, Hobart, is a regular customer of a certain shop Matthew Orson opened with a partner. The shop is Massachusetts’ largest otaku... Japanese culture retailer, called ‘Taylor’s Store’ even though it’s obviously a book shop.

‘Hero of the National Bank’, also known as ‘Hero of the World’ Shibuya Shouma, the bank he works at also invested a bit into this shop. Economically it’s a joint project between America and Japan, while on the surface it’s a bridge between Japanese and American communication.

And the shop owner Jonathan Taylor is a bald, bristly, strange-looking man. Those few people who know the reason behind the store’s conception would call him ‘Exiled Jonathan’, but from the way he’s obsessed with baby and parenting books before even getting a girlfriend shows he really likes kids as well.

His motto is, “I shaved on purpose, I’m not bald!” Whenever he says that, someone hearing it for the first time will say, all touched,

“OH—What an amazing tsundere!”

You guys have misunderstood Japanese culture, that’s not called tsundere.

Since it’s situated in the busy area of Boston, the customers of ‘Taylor’s Shop’ tend to be students from nearby Harvard or MIT. Come to think of it, that means it’s a shop that the elite anime fans of America frequent. The moral standards are really slipping.

Hobart was one of those customers as well.

The other regulars call him ‘Gogg’<sup>[3]</sup>, which took him by surprise too. Because his interest doesn’t seem to be MS (Mobile Suits). In order to cater to everyone’s interests, the shop has a wide array of merchandise, that’s why it’s unsurprising to see customers who like pretty girl dolls or collects cards. Like just now, when Matthew mentioned this, his face was full of confusion and he turned away a little coldly, probably for that reason.

Before Matthew found him, Hobart was standing in the middle of the rather empty car park, one hand in his pocket. Perhaps the two of them agreed on it beforehand, because he is also biting a donut.

“Mr. Hobart!”

The man who hears them and turns around is a large guy, perfect candidate for a foreign sumo wrestler. But not all of that is fat. The distance between his neck and shoulders isn’t obvious, but as a practitioner of the D&P (Donut and Pizza) lifestyle, his body is rather sturdy. It’s probably because he’s still young,

right? Once he's past thirty, all hell will break loose.

Hobart leaves the cars and gathering crowd, jogging over to them.

In short, he's a huge Caucasian, just running a little will turn his face and arms red. To put it nicely, he's full of a country feel, a gentle giant. To put it bluntly, he's a healthy fatso. And in this slightly chilly November weather, he's still wearing shorts, so short they're not even halfway. But it seems he doesn't really mind.

"Yeow~~"

He waves the donut at Matthew, stretching out a right arm thick enough to contend with America's arm-wrestling champion to Murata and Rodriguez.

On that face unique to blondes, his eyebrows are so pale they're practically invisible. Underneath his jotting forehead, there's a pair of pale blue eyes. The distance from his nose to his lips is really wide, so his whole face looks a bit like a primate.

If he were a teacher in a Japanese middle school, he'd definitely be given a nickname on the first day of school itself.

That is, Gorilla!

"Good day, I'm Gogghart Hobart."

Now it's become Gogghart!

"Although normally I tell people to call me Kelly."

...Now it's changed to Kelly.

"I'm not German, but I'm called Gogghart, you guys must be very confused, right? But you can call me any name you want, I don't mind."

To turn over the impression overseas that Japanese people are stiff and unemotional, Murata uses an extremely friendly smile to greet him.

"Good morning, Kelly."

"It's evening now, right? Also, my nickname is Gogg."

Immediately corrected.

“Is it okay with the fire, Gogg?”

“Mn—Honestly, if I say I don’t feel anything because that represents the company, I’d be lying... But I’m fine.”

Kelly Hobart puts up a thumb firmly,

“It’s nothing!”

“As expected of Gogg—”[\[4\]](#)

The pediatrician and Matthew Orson have expressions of idolization for some reason. The only out of it is Murata.

“I am part of the company, after all, so I can’t just leave it while there’s a fire and go home on my own, sorry for being late.”

“You say you’re part of the company, don’t tell me you’re the president?”

Hobart narrows those sunken blue eyes shyly, answering Murata’s obviously flattering question,

“No—No. I’ve been a speaker at the Discovery School here since three years ago.”

“Ah~ Something to do with wrestling?”

“No, sniping.”

“That’s...”

“It’s a very popular class, too! And the ladies like it, it’s about as cool as MONKEY Tojo.”

Is there an assassin with that nickname? On the other hand, anybody with anything to do with the word ‘To’ (East) can’t possibly stand behind him. Kelly Hobart says a joke so cold the chilly wind blows right into their faces, and he even laughs until he’s bent over backwards. But speaking of sniping, is it really okay to teach something like that in a school in the middle of the commercial and tourist area?

“As for what I want to say, it has something to do with this.”

Hobart takes something wrapped in oil paper out of his packet.

“Aah, how could you be so careless with it.”

“It’s okay, doctor, as long as it’s not near a fire.”

“Eh? Ah, this thing can’t be near fire?”

Maybe he’s so taken aback by this sudden mention, Hobart nearly drops the object. It’s just the right size to hold in one’s palm.

“I see~~ I think my grandmother put it in a lead box, but she meant to avoid what spiritual magic or supernatural phenomena, so it should have nothing to do with fire, right? Honestly, I don’t really know about these antiques.”

Murata accepts the object from those meaty hands, opening up the bundle of oil paper weighing down his left hand. He’s so nervous even his hands are shaking.

“Where did you get this from?”

“A long, long—time ago, my grandfather’s father... In other words, my great grandfather found this in the house he was working as a butler in... It seems to be something a bit creepy.”

“I think so too.”

A piece of metal appears in front of their eyes—a twisted triangle with each side about 10cm long, prolonged contact with heat and air turning the metal black, while the broken part has rusted. Although it’s not even a centimeter thick, it’s fairly heavy. Why would he put something so heavy in his pocket, isn’t he scared his pants will be pulled down?

Murata touches the surface of the metal gently with his palm, and finds that the animal-motif carvings are already somewhat faded. Even if he can’t identify them, there are words carved onto the left half.

Exactly the same as the images received.

Just one glance at the high resolution photographs had gotten him thinking. If Murata’s... or the owner of this ancient soul’s memory is correct, then this is indeed part of the Box. Strictly speaking, it’s part of the decorations on the edge of ‘Inferno on the Tundra’. Of course it wasn’t there when the Box was built. In the beginning, the Boxes had no extra embellishments. It was after they came to

Earth, that some expert from an unknown era had personally installed them.

And then at some point the Box got separated from the decorations.

Murata touches the indentations of the words, murmuring to himself.

Just then Rodriguez asks Hobart for Murata, who's staring at the metal piece wordlessly,

"What was your great grandfather's name?"

"Pennwater, Pennwater Hobart. My grandmother's name was Diane Hobart, before marrying she was Diane Graves."

"Graves!? By Graves, you mean..."

"That's right, they're quite popular in Boston."

"Are you a member of the Graves family?"

"Wait a sec! No, I'm not, not at all!"

Kelly Hobart's hand, that usually holds his sniper gun, is now waving desperately to refute his question. "My great grandfather was once the Graves family butler, butlers can get married too. The Hobarts had two sons, the younger one is my paternal grandfather. I saw his picture when he was in the army, I guess he's quite good-looking. Blonde hair, blue eyes, when he wore a uniform he was quite handsome!"

Matthew Orson seems to have thought of something, his expression all perverted.

"Naturally girls wouldn't let such a good-looking guy go, and my grandfather didn't want to waste God's gift, either. So he wasn't just two-timing them, but triple-timing them, just like Poseidon's trident. It's strange~ Since I have a quarter of his blood, I should have inherited those genes, right? Anyway, he had about three girlfriends by the time he enlisted."

"One of them was Diane Graves?"

"No no no, they hadn't gotten together yet at that time. Then my grandfather took three photographs onto the battlefield... and accidentally lost two of them."

“Waa—how heartless of him!”

“But my grandfather said confidently that maybe those two lost photos can sooth a single soldier’s soul, so he’s done a good deed!”

A playboy’s actions are truly unforgivable. Just as everyone is about to agree on that, the fleshy bone that’s on fire erupts into sparks, and the fire truck finally arrives. Too slow, they’re so slow it makes one wonder if the one reporting the fire waiting for the meat to be fully cooked first.

“My grandfather had no choice, so he really cherished the remaining photographs. Back then I think he was in Russia, one day they were violently attacked, until the squadron he was in was completely isolated. And then just as the terrible fight was turning their way, my grandfather and his comrades took turns smoking a cigarette, and then he took out the photo on his pocket...”

“After the war ends, I’m gonna go back and marry this girl.”

He said it!

Although the one talking is his descendant, the other three touched their foreheads before he could react, and say in the same, sorrowful voice,

“So sorry, Kelly.”

“I’m guessing your grandfather must have been affected by the atmosphere to say something like that, huh, Kelly.”

“But from what you said, you shouldn’t exist in this world, Kelly.”

“He didn’t die, right!?”

“Eh--!?”

“Actually we did receive his telegram. It was a misunderstanding, so everyone thought he’d died on the battlefield. So when Grandfather came back, all his previous lovers were already married. Just then, Diane Graves, who had married a Harvard graduate elite lawyer appeared in front of his eyes. Even though the war was over, Grandfather stayed on in the army. Perhaps he got fond of the military uniform—”

“Is there a lot more to this story?”

Murata's already irritated. He's not that interested in someone else's grandparent story. Contrary to other fat people, Hobart is surprisingly talkative, and left to his own devise he might very well continue to 'Chapter 2, how my father met my mother' and 'Chapter 3, the story in my head about me and her'. Although it's a bit mean, it would be very dangerous if he doesn't find a suitable time to hit the brakes.

"Alright, to make it short, my grandfather was hot, my grandmother liked him. But she already had a husband, so they couldn't married, and eloped instead. My great grandfather Pennwater Hobart saw that his master's daughter had an affair with his son, and felt responsible for it, so he quit as the Graves family butler, and settled down in Freeport near Boston. See—this is short enough, right? Even though she's not in the direct family line, no matter what she's a lady with a background, so something like that must have been very humiliating, right?"

"Wow~~That Diane actually—"

Murata brings out Regent's memories, quietly impressed.

She was the only blonde beauty in the family, and everyone's ideal woman. Though they were cousins, she was the complete opposite of April, who chased the cows and went for adventures in the woods. April once said that Diane had a fiancé who was always punctual, though he couldn't tell if she was boasting or jealous.

"Eloping with the butler's son, huh—Back then there was no way to tell she would do something like that."

"Ken."

The pediatrician frowns behind his glasses, wishing that Murata would not talk about them as though they were one.

"Even though I'm his grandson who graduated from Harvard, I still think life is so complicated!"

Beside them, Matthew Orson really respects Gogg as an impressive person. But through a normal point of view, the fact that he's one of the very few people in the world who graduated from a super famous school only to work as a

sniping instructor at a company that seems to have copyrighted another company's name, may be more surprising than the fact that he's a soldier's grandson who entered an Ivy League school.

That's Shibuya Shouri's dream school as well, looks like life is unpredictable.

"So after Diane got married, she stayed at home to watch over this piece of metal... You could say she was entrusted with it, right? But where did she get this from? Don't tell me it was her dowry?"

"Ah—I overheard on the phone? It's not Grandmother's, but Great-grandfather's possession."

"The butler's?"

"Mn, apparently it was because one generation of the Graves family head died in a fire. That person was apparently even older than my great grandfather."

He's talking about Hazel Graves.

"Great-grandfather went there to clean up the mess. He couldn't let the head's granddaughter go through her own grandmother's earthly possessions, could he? After all, her grandmother just got burned alive, if they let her into the scene and she found some remains, that would have caused an irredeemable scene. He couldn't let the adorable young miss face something like this, so he secretly cleaned up as the butler. And then he found this."

The young Hobart used his chin to point at the piece of metal in Murata's hands.

"But before the head died, Great-grandfather heard that this piece of metal was inlaid on something else. It's just that it was burnt so badly no one knew what it was. Could it be part of a shield or a mirror?"

The three people present naturally wouldn't reply. One doesn't know, and while the other two do know, they would rather no one else found out. The more people know about this, the more troublesome things will get.

"Forget it. ...Anyway, Great-grandfather heard that the head collected countless precious things... And apparently this is a taboo people shouldn't touch. That's why he hid it—he had to protect the cute young miss, so he kept

this shrapnel, covered in ash from the fire, by his own side.

Kelly Hobart shrugs in a very American way, the neck and shoulders that aren't too obvious sinking into his fleshy body.

"Grandmother felt guilty for eloping with Grandfather, so she dutifully obeyed Great-grandfather's dying wishes. In other words, 'never give the shrapnel that was found at the scene of the fire to the young lady from the Graves family. If adorable Miss April met the same end the head did, wouldn't that be bad?'"

Since he's asking for approval, Matthew quickly nods hard. Rodriguez moves his chin as well.

"And then it got to my hands. 'Goghart, listen up: no matter what, you can't give this thing to the Graves family.' Back then I asked, 'Okay, Grandma. So what should I do?' Her expression immediately changed, and she said in a voice like a Salem witch, 'Just keep it by your side!' So I just smiled like a good boy and said, 'Mn, I know!'"

Murata laughs at the large man impersonating an old lady, and subconsciously tightens his hold on the metal piece.

How he wants to turn it around and confirm. It would be great if there were any wooden shards on the other side. It's okay even if it's just ash, just a tiny bit...

"But I still feel a little sorry for her. After all, Diane was a lady from the Graves family."

"You're wrong."

When the pediatrician voices his honest thoughts, Kelly Hobart shakes his head sadly. His face and arms are scarlet from the blood rushing upwards. Although the weather now is slightly chilly, there's still a light sweat on his forehead.

"Great-grandfather always thought of Diane as his own daughter."

Hearing the determination in Kelly's words, everyone else falls silent. This is their family problem, their thoughts can't be understood by outsiders, and outsiders can't interfere either. All they can say now is—

I see.

“But two years ago when Grandmother went to heaven in search of Grandfather, I started feeling uneasy. It’s probably because the Graves family all came to attend the funeral, right? To think there were some pretty impressive people there, too! There was even someone who claimed she was the high school idol and cheerleading captain, plus a world famous treasure hunter.”

That’s Abigail Graves. For all you know Hobart also thinks that koi fish is a very impressive expert on all things Japan. But in a way, since Abigail is his distant relative and a fellow admirer of Japanese culture, maybe this is what they mean by blood is thicker than water?

However Hobart is afraid of Abigail, or more precisely he’s hesitant to approach her. In fact, if the two of them sat down and talked properly, they might find a lot of things to talk about.

“I don’t plan on communicating with the other relatives, no matter how impressive they are, if she found out where I live, one day she may break into my house, and then say ‘Return that to me.’” If something like that happened, I’m not confident I can still keep the promise I made to Grandma. Then I remembered that Japan has the so-called ‘offering’ system.”

“That’s why you thought of talking about it to Jonathan, the shop owner who understands Japanese culture. Thanks a lot, Kelly, it was all thanks to you we could find it, you have our sincerest gratitude. Could you give it to me?”

Without waiting for a reply, Murata stuffs the piece of the Box into his pocket. If the other person says no, he plans on running with it.

“Kelly, take my advice, don’t take out your girlfriend’s picture and show it to people on the battlefield.”

Hearing Murata’s suggestion, Hobart sticks up his donut-scented thumb hard,

“I’m not as popular as my grandfather, there’s nothing to worry about!”

Matthew & Rodri’s gazes are full of admiration, it’s almost a reflex action.

On the way back to the hotel, Murata dazedly thinks about everything in his

home back in Japan.

Stuff like the entrance to the condos, the stacks of mail boxes, the camel-colored decorations in the elevator, the puppy next door, then his family members. His family started living in those apartments since his parents, and the Graves family may have stayed in Boston since the Reclamation Period. Even the Hobart family, who aren't that famous, have lived in Freeport since his great grandfather's generation.

"No wonder there's no sense of family..."

"What? What's the matter, Ken?"

"Nothing, I was just thinking that Kelly Hobart is a pretty decent guy."

The pediatrician sitting next to him with his hair let down laughs, "Gogg, you say—"

"Blonde hair and blue eyes, graduate from an Ivy League university, professional-level skills with the rifle, interesting to talk to. If he was willing to work-out a bit and turn into a muscleman, he'd be perfect. Maybe one day he won't be able to say he's not as popular with the ladies as his grandfather, then?"

"Girls aren't that simple-minded, right—"

For a young person with a proper body but no gun skills, is this something to be happy about? Murata sighs deeply,

"But life sure is unexpected!"

"Why the heck are you suddenly saying that?"

"I'm talking about Diane Graves. As a girl from that time, she was practically perfect. It felt as though 'the ideal woman' was a phrase coined for her. Everyone in the Graves family shook their heads and sighed at April, but they weren't worried about Diane in the slightest. Everyone believed she would marry the perfect person, and then live a perfect life with zero imperfections... That's what Regent's memories recorded."

He feels Rodriguez's gaze on him, adding,

"But not only did she have an affair with the butler's son, she even eloped with

him. Honestly, when she was in her twenties, it was impossible to imagine her doing something like that. So the future is something even she couldn't predict."

"That's right, and you don't know what will happen either! Maybe twenty years from now, you'll be in a rural clinic holding a stethoscope to a villager's chest, you know!"

"I don't even know if I want to study the sciences or the arts."

Matthew suddenly slows down the RANGEROVER, and then immediately returns to the initial speed, so it shouldn't be some problem with car. Maybe he's affirming the 'Deer Crossing' sign?

"...Does Bob know?"

"Hm? Bob wouldn't be interested in which course you'll be studying, right?"

"Not that, I'm talking about Diane Graves' life. The fact that she married Pennwater Hobart's son... No, he definitely knows that, and he must have gone around them like a new butler. But what about the piece of the Box?"

Driven by his unease, Murata grips the metal piece in his pocket tightly. The oil paper in his hand is even crumpled by his grip.

"Does Bob know that Mr Hobart and Diane were always protecting a piece from 'Inferno on the Tundra'?"

"Mn—"

The car slows down again, this time evidently headed for the roadside, but it quickly returns to the center of the road. After confirming that Matthew is awake, Rodriguez murmurs again,

"Mn... I'm not sure—Even if he is the Maou, he wouldn't purposely expose the secret an old person tried so desperately to hide, right? Though if they came here to fight over it at least there won't be the danger of a bullet storm."

"An old person's desperation, huh? Literally speaking, they're both—Mm-gah!"

The impact from behind almost makes Murata bite his tongue, his back bouncing away from the seat, the seatbelt sinking deep into his stomach.

“W-what happened!?”

“It’s kamikaze!”

The moment he hears kamikaze, the Japanese history expert Murata reacts instinctively,

“Eh? Kublai!?”

“Aw, come on, Ken, talk in a language Mexicans understand—”

As the atmosphere in the car descends into panic, there are two more impacts that sound like ‘Gash! Kash!’

“The car behind us looked really suspicious, so I tried many times to let them overtake me, but he just won’t! Looks like we’re being followed!”

“F-f-followed, w-w-w-w-why--!?”

“I have no idea what’s going on, and then that person suddenly attacked us!”

Even if they escape to the opposite car lane, the car behind them keeps on their tail, continuously ramming into them. Murata finally manages to turn around and observe the car attacking them. Rodriguez, on the other hand, is being tortured by the safety belt.

“No way? Mm-yeah! It’s Bob’s people, mm-yeah! A substitute!? Even so, he discovered my betrayal way too fast--!”

“No, no matter what Bob won’t send an old person as an assassin.”

The old lady whose eyes are wide as saucers, sits in the driver seat of the red PLYMOUTH that keeps ramming into them. She’s so scared all her white hair is standing, her hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. It looks like she’s not attacking them on purpose.

“Damn, her brakes are not working!”

The old lady and the red car. It sounds like the title of a picture book, which makes people smile in spite of themselves, but in reality they have to add ‘from hell’ or ‘nightmarish’ somewhere in the middle to describe this. It’s not fun and games anymore when you’re being collided into.

After a series of intense collisions, with one more crash the RANGEROVER

dashes to the shoulder across the road, protected by the little bit of fencing, and finally comes to a stop on the road. As for the PLYMOUTH chasing the fender of the RANGEROVER intently, it destroys the bucket-shaped seat and flies over the road shoulder. Unfortunately, there isn't a fence in front of the PLYMOUTH.

The old lady's red car falls off a five meter tall slope.

They watch in horror as the car flies out. After a moment, the driver at the bottom of the slope opens the driver seat door, staggering out. There's blood on her forehead, but she can still stand on her own, so she should be fine.

Rodriguez and Orson hold out their hands for the old lady, trying to grab her hand and pull her up, but for some reason she keeps shaking her head and resisting, refusing to climb up the slope and yelling in a voice hoarse from agitation,

"Help! Help!"

"We're already helping you—Come up here quick, ma'am. Or could it be that the leaking oil has made it slippery?"

Maybe it's because the oil tank has been destroyed, the PLYMOUTH is leaking some liquid that dyes the grass underneath black. The old lady smells the leather seats burning, her voice getting even more agitated,

"My granddaughter is inside!"

"Eh!?"

Matthew's phone is in the car, Rodriguez's flip phone was destroyed by the impact of the collisions just now. There aren't any cars passing by, either.

There's no time to hesitate!

Murata slides down the slope. He rushes to the car and tries to open the door, but it doesn't budge—turns out it's locked.

"Ken, break the window! Break it!"

"You tell me to break it, but with what!?"

All he sees around him is nothing but wild grass, forget a pipe or log, there isn't even a stone. He can't possibly break reinforced glass with his hands, can he?

There are no tools, what to do...

There's a little girl in the seat. She's fastened in the children's seat, her red face looking like she's about to cry. She may not know what's happened, only feeling terrified. Her brown eyes stare at Murata, and she reaches out her little hand towards him through the car window.

There is something, though?

There's a distinct heaviness in the pocket of his shirt.

I have something to break the glass with.

"Close your eyes!"

He grips the metal piece wrapped in oil paper that he just obtained tightly, attacking the car glass with the sharp end. The first knock spreads cobweb cracks across the glass, the second shatters the glass everywhere.

"Come here, it's okay."

He picks up the light body from the seat, rushing up the slope. After three, four steps he sees Rodriguez's outstretched hand, and hurriedly hands over the crying girl. After he heaves a sigh of relief, he realizes that his body has become exceptionally lighter—his shirt has gotten lighter, the pocket empty. He quickly turns around, and there's a black object near the bumper of the flattened PLYMOUTH, fallen amongst the oil-soaked grass and so hard to see clearly.

"Crap..."

"No, Ken, don't go back!"

Murata turns around and runs, a voice stopping him from behind.

Jose Rodriguez is an excellent pediatrician, and a friendly, kind person. Since he was young, before he knew about the strange condition he had, that man has doted on him, more so than his own parents. That man is the one who protected him since before he was born.

Josie is always right.

But this is the only time he cannot obey him.

Once he loses that, he might never be able to grasp his tracks again.

Murata rushes to the PLYMOUTH, his footsteps staggering, and half lies down to reach his hand out for the piece of the Box, first hooking it with his finger, and then grabbing hold of the mysterious, warm triangular piece of metal. He holds it tightly in his palm in case it drops.

Just then, something sparkles in the right corner of his vision.

He sees a spot of orange in the engine valve, and a fire inside.

“Ken!?”

Looks like I was wrong.

Murata ignores his broken glasses, laughing at himself.

If he stays here any longer he would definitely be caught in the explosion.

If that person were here, maybe he would look down on me, who couldn't even save one child? But he probably wouldn't go to the extent of looking down on me, because he's a good guy. He'd definitely be disappointed, though.

The sky and the earth go upside down, the grass and trees that were fine a moment ago now sway left and right like plants in the sea. The world twists at a ninety dress angle, all the straight lines curving.

The flames surrounding him coil upwards like a spring. The fire is strong, but not hot in the slightest, even though he does smell hair and clothes burning. Thinking about the fleshy skeleton, he suddenly feels like laughing.

But before Murata can laugh, he's suffocated by the heat. From the distance comes the doctor's yells.

He just knows that he won't die, otherwise he couldn't possibly be this calm.

The shard is using the power of the flames and the explosion, preparing to return to where the Box is. It could just be ash, or a splinter of wood stuck behind the metal, getting ready to chase the Box it spent eternity with, jumping to a completely different world. As long as he can withstand this impact, Murata's body should be able to follow it. Hazel Graves experienced this pain before.

But Shibuya, next time you want to go to that world, remember to take me along with you. I'd rather not go for this way again.

Because it hurts way too much.

## References

1. ↑ Not too sure how to put it, sort of the difference between a small, accidental fire versus a full-fledged fire disaster, possibly manmade?
2. ↑ An American, privately held, mail-order, online, and retail company, currently based in Freeport, Maine, United States.
3. ↑ A mass-produced amphibious mobile suit from Gundam, heavily armored to withstand deep sea pressure. ([http://gundam.wikia.com/wiki/MSM-03\\_Gogg](http://gundam.wikia.com/wiki/MSM-03_Gogg))
4. ↑ 4. Apparently a famous line from Mobile Suit Gundam, said by the pilot of Gogg after igniting a sea mine.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5

When Conrad returned as promised, I was on the verge of falling asleep due to extreme exhaustion. That's why, I didn't even notice the sound of his footsteps getting closer.

"Please don't fall asleep."

Since I had been sitting hugging my knees and looking down, I couldn't even see the heartwarming red of the torch. My field of vision which was completely black lightened up just a little.

"I have returned."

"A... ah."

My breath couldn't turn into voice. When I closed my eyes and pressed my throat, Conrad noticed it immediately.

"Drink it."

The water made a splashing sound. Looks like the portable container had been filled a lot with water. I choked the moment I drank it, and ended up throwing more than half of it. Since I greedily tried to gulp it down in one go, he couldn't make me drink it properly.

"Shh, stay still."

When Conrad put his left arm behind my neck to support me, he took a water droplet on his finger and first moistened my lips. After that he made me drink little by little. The soft leather hit my chin and mouth. Slowly changing the angle, the water that is not so cold floes down my throat.

It's the water that has been carried under the sunshine of the desert.

When my extreme thirst subsided, I remembered an unexpected scene, it turned funny and I let out a snicker. It doesn't hurt anymore even if I move my

throat.

"What is it?"

"Did you pick up that method from your big brother?"

"Even if you say picked up..."

"Earlier, Gwendal used a similar method to feed some milk to the puppy."

It could have been a cat for all I know.

Honestly, when it comes to Conrad, he always treats me like a kid.

"Maybe... for how long were you thirsty?"

"Throughout, for around five days."

"For five days!"

"But it's fine, I survived."



Near my shoulder blade, there was a muffled voice saying "really". He buried his face in the nape of my neck, wrapped his long arms around my back. The finger filled with power, touched a part lower than the center of my spine.

"I thought I would lose you."

"You're exaggerating, Conrad."

He hugged me so tight that I thought he had changed into Gunter. But I myself know this. Precisely because we both are here that I can laugh it off saying 'you're exaggerating', there was a possibility that we would never meet again. And there certainly was a moment when the probability of that happening was

exceedingly close.

"You don't look well. You've become thin."

"It's because I'm hungry. If you continue to fast you'll definitely lose weight, right? Aaa, the muscles I had finally built are all gone."

"Even though you were the type who wouldn't forget to eat even if you forgot your audience with someone!"

Even so, it's because he's relieved that he can joke about like this. When he let go of his arms, my body suddenly woke up. The action was very fast.

The flow of air hitting my body was faster than usual, the momentum was so good that I was bewildered for a moment. I wasn't accustomed to a healthy person's movements because there was no one other than Saralegui who doesn't possess any motor skills and the exhausted me here for the past few days.

"If you don't mind the taste, I'll get you some food. Please don't fall asleep satisfied just because you drank water. After we go to the surface, I'll let you sleep as much as you want."

"I'll try... but I won't be able to sleep above there anyways. We'll be riding a horse again, right?"

"There are many ways to take a nap even while riding a horse."

"Un."

Judging his position from where I hear his voice, he is right in front of me. With one knee touching the ground he's must have been looking straight at me.

"You said you have something to tell me."

"Yes."

I put my head down so as to hide both my eyes from his gaze.

"That guy, he has his eyes on the box"

"Saralegui? He's giving us trouble again..."

"That's right, but looks like he's still not aware of the box. I think there is something in the royal tombs and his mother and younger brother are trying to

obtain that thing. He himself wants that, with the intentions of getting it in his own hands. That's why following the path their mother had used when they were still babies, he headed directly for their ancestral tombs from the underground. If it's here he can be at ease, unnoticed by those two. Slipping through the eyes of his mother and younger brother, he's trying to do the exact same thing they did that time"

"By mother, you mean her?"

"Yes, what was it again, Alazon? A courageous person by that name. Amazon? Amazoness? Although I think I missed the name by a letter."

"Even though we have met his younger brother, we haven't even their mother's appearance from behind. From the younger brother's talks, her condition is very bad due to a severe illness"

Conrad let out a small sigh. He put his right palm on my knees.

"If you see from the son's perspective, she might be a ruler whom you cannot exactly call a good person."

"But in the dream I had, it was different from what Saralegui described... although it's only until you tell me a dream is a dream."

"Anyways, there's no such thing as being too careful. As for the box is concerned, both the Shimaron countries are troublesome. Revealing their faults early saved us. Well then, your majesty, it's not good to make Hazel and the others wait for too long. Can you stand?"

From the wind that hit my cheeks, I understood that he had stretched his hand in front of me. Unable to hide it any longer, I opened my heavy mouth.

"I'm not done yet."

Even though my throat was supposed to be moist, my voice was hoarse. I wanted to run away from this place.

"Did you hear about it from Saralegui?"

"No."

Conrad's tone became firm. I'm sure he must have stiffened his lips and narrowed his eyes slightly. Narrowing the eyebrow with a scar, he might be

frowning like his big brother.

"I won't listen to that man's words anymore. No matter how pleasant it sounds to your ears, it's poison."

Even I think the same.

"...Even I think the same. But what he said earlier is true. It's the truth."

I'm hesitating, since it's something I really can't say, I stop at my words. But if I think who else could convey this to him, even if he hates me, even if he holds a grudge against me, I have no other choice. It felt as if throwing out blood.

I couldn't raise my face up.

"We have lost Josak."

"Is that so."

Without even being moved a little by the bad news, Conrad gave a short answer. I was the one who was upset.

"It was an emergency situation. It can't be helped."

"It can't be helped, is that all you can say!? It was my fault you know? At that time I..."

"It's not your fault"

"You're wrong, it is my fault! If I wouldn't have chased after Sara to the underground... no, that's not it... if I had ran much faster... surely..."

"Your majesty, your majesty!"

"It's alright if you don't think about it. It's alright if you don't think about what happened after that."

"I will think..."

"Your majesty."

He grabbed my shoulders. With his palms just like that, he soothingly caressed my arms.

"He would be alive, by my side... making fun of me like always."

When I thought that the heat had spread to my knees, it was actually my own

tears. Even if it's embarrassing and not manly, I can't stop by putting up such a simple act. I could not bear it.

I shouldn't have drunk water, but it's too late to regret now. If I had remained thirsty, I wouldn't have been able to shed tears. I would have been able to forcibly swallow the lump of emotions stuck in my throat.

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. Your best friend, an important comrade... I..."

"No matter what I say now, I'm afraid your majesty will not accept it. No matter what I say, you'll blame yourself. It's better if we talk after you have calmed down a little."

Conrad returned to his usual soft tone. I stuffed my forehead into my knees, my back curved.

"But it really is my fault! A comrade has died in front of my eyes! How can you even understand how much I'm suffering."

"Do you think I don't understand?"

With his dried fingers, he caresses the region between my hair and nape behind my neck.

"How many people do you think I've killed. Me, Gwendal and even Josak is the same. How many do you think I have killed, how many did I let die... it's uncountable."

As if narrating a folk tale to children he spoke in a distant voice. He spoke as if anger, despair or any other violent emotions had all been eliminated.

"It's really countless."

"But they were enemies, right? Because it was... a war."

"It wasn't only enemies. Even allies, much more younger than me, there were many new soldiers who were like boys. They all died. It was my fault."

"Your fault..."

"Under my orders they fought, advanced, were defeated, and at times lost their lives even though we won. A soldier's death is the responsibility of the leader. If they are assigned to an incompetent leader, the young soldiers will all

be wiped out without even giving any results to the battle. The outcome of the war is not only the responsibility of the commander who oversees the army, but also the king who leads the people. We don't know how many we let die. How much good lives we have wasted, I don't know even now. It was certainly my fault. I let them go knowingly. They went ahead knowing that they won't be able to survive. The fact that I ordered them to die, my sin is much greater than yours."

Conrad said to battle and die and then he murmured.

"That is why there were hardly any who returned alive."

His thumb is overlapping my carotid artery. But it's completely different from the time Saralegui touched it. Rather than feeling fear, I feel relieved. Even if I can't see it tells me that the person talking to me is not an enemy.

"Gisela often says this... if we could have been able to save more. She laments if we would have treated more quickly and efficiently, another ten people, no even if one more person would have been saved. However I'm envious of her."

"Why?"

"I couldn't even save a single person."

"Conrad, that's..."

He embraced my head, and pressed his forehead near the boundary between my neck and chin.

I can feel the flow of the blood.

"Returning alive... even though I don't feel ashamed of it right now... since I returned alive I had to report to the parents or family of the deceased soldier. At that time I was worried about I shout tell them... really... how should I have reported to them. Should I say it like this? Your husband or your son fought bravely, but he died because of my fault. Should I have said that? How would your majesty conveyed it?"

"He fulfilled his duty..."

I took a short breath.

"He fulfilled his duties... but lost his life..."

"That's more than enough. Thank you for notifying me, I'm grateful."

"But that's..."

When I lift my head up, the torch placed on the ground was vaguely swaying. The warm mass of orange appears to be like flowers.

"That won't do, it can't end so easily!"

"You must end it, your majesty."

So as to not frustrate the king anymore, Conrad spoke in his elder brother's tone.

"Although it's the one that stands above all who lets soldiers die, but it's the soldier who decided who he will risk his life for. All by himself. That's how it's supposed to be."

It could be for the sake of his beloved family or for the sake of his beautiful home town. And sometimes there are people who would risk their lives for something abstract like their honor.

"Gurrier had decided for whom he should work for. Please acknowledge his decision."

"But..."

"I beg you, please do as I say. No matter for how long a king regrets for one soldier, it will only set a bad example to his people. Although, if it's within your heart, you can lament for as long as you like."

"Is that... because I'm the king, I must endure it all by myself...?"

"Yuuri, I'm not saying that."

Conrad grabbed my wrist and made me stand.

"If it's in my arms, you can cry as much as you want."

I regretted abiding by his words. That's why I cried all I wanted to. On his back that smelled like the sun.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6

My last secret was known when we were right beneath the hole leading to the surface.

Until then it somehow went unnoticed. While proceeding in the passageway I stumbled many times and would grab onto Conrad's clothes, I would only say that it's because I didn't eat anything for five days that I couldn't walk properly. Even though he sympathetically offered to carry me I said I don't want to lose my muscles like this, Conrad reluctantly gave in.

I didn't think that I would be to hide it till the end of the journey but the truth is it was unexpectedly early. The moment I try to ride a horse and fall in the sand while getting on it would be a laughable scene, that's what I expected.

It was just past noon and the sunlight was still bright, it was reaching up to the bottom of the hole lightening it up. It was so bright, I couldn't see anything, not even shadows. Everything was pure white.

I can hear Hazel Graves' high-spirited voice from far above.

"Are you done with your business? If so then hurry up and climb up by yourself. You are as fast as it would take me to write down my whole life's story!"

"Please give me some time."

I finally replied in a loud voice. There must be a rope hung down from the surface somewhere in this flood of light but it's so dazzling bright that there's no way for me to search for it. It felt as if its white darkness.

"All right I'll climb! All right I'll climb! .... umm... I wonder if I'll be able to climb on my own."

"I won't let you do such a reckless thing. Hold on to me. I've already secured the rope. Yuuri, give me your hand..."

It was at that time.

Seeing the sunlight after a long time was dazzling, I couldn't even make out the shadows. Also, the sunlight was warm so I couldn't tell his position by his body temperature or movements. On top of that since the place was dorm-shaped the sound echoed, I couldn't tell his position even by his voice.

All the elements were working against me, I had stretched my hand in the opposite direction.

"I'm here, your majesty."

"Oh! That side."

I failed for the second time.

"Wait, it couldn't be..."

I can't hide it like this any longer. I admit defeat and cover up my eyes with my left hand. Relieving me from the painful white, I could finally see a gentle shadow coming towards me.

"I can't see. It's been like that for around two days I think. I don't know exactly from when."

"You can't see?"

"That's right, like this I can't see anything other than the faint colours of light."

"... Is it because... of the darkness?"

"Even I thought the same but"

It is said that you can diagnose the symptoms by touching, Conrad held my cheeks with his hands and stroked near my eyes with his thumb. When I closed my eyes, he gently pressed my eyelids.

"Do you think it's because your eyes can't get used to the light since you were in the darkness for a long time... really?"

"Unfortunately, that's true. Even with the torches, even with the light seeping through the hole in the ceiling, I can't see much. I can only guess by the lights and shadows. But I'm used to it now. Because there was someone who taught me how to find the sun."

Conrad most probably didn't hear the last part, not to mention he lamented

like a calamity had befallen himself. It's rare to see him drop his guard like that.

"What are you saying! Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"It's a question of priorities."

"Priorities...don't say such things"

But it's true. Humans can confirm something having experienced it firsthand. And it was the same in this case. I only realized the feelings inside me when I told Conrad about it. I'm only lying if I say it's not a big deal. But if I think of it as "On a scale of ten, how much painful is it ?" then my vision problems would be either six or seven out of ten. Compared to the other two issues at hand, it's not that important.

That's why I tried to hide it.

"If I put it in the order of importance, it would be third. We need to be careful about Saralegui's involvement with the boxes, and even about Yozak... even that is important, its painful that he's gone. My eyes can't see... it's worse, but that's my problem. Because of that the world won't be in danger or someone won't have to lose their life, nothing tragic will happen. That's why I thought its fine even if no one realized it but looks like it was not possible after all."

I couldn't suppress the embarrassing smile on my lips.

"I didn't want to worry you over little things."

"... I already told you it's my duty."

While talking, I became used to standing in the light.

The dazzling white had turned slightly yellowish, it changed to a milky colour.

"Please don't make such a sad face. Even if I can't see I can tell what face you're making. It's not anyone's fault, its only my personal problem."

If I look at the heavens, I can see the sky which I told in my dreams.

If I turn towards someone I can tell if they are there.

"And if I think about it, its not like I've completely lost my eyesight. When I was underground even I was a upset, I panicked since it was dark and I couldn't see anything, I could barely distinguish between light and shadow... you could say

that all of a sudden my vision became really bad."

"Lights and shadows... how much can you see?"

"hmm... for example the sky is the colour of water barely white. And if there is a pure white circle, then that is the sun. Conrad looks like..."

If I reach for his hair, I can't clearly distinguish it as brown but...

"Because it becoming dark, it looks like a faint gray. Its like a proper human figure drawn in the sand on the seashore with the foot. I'm sorry if you feel bad."

Without thinking I blurted it out and hastily apologized. No one would be happy to be told that they look like they have been drawn by foot.

"You can only see human figures."

"Don't worry, I don't have cat ears or something. When I was in that passageway, I couldn't see anything since there was no light or shadow. But it's different now. If there is something in front of my eyes I can tell, I can tell that you are right here Conrad. The sun really is amazing!"

I raised both my hands to the heavens. My whole body was covered by sunlight. I wanted to shake off the five days of soot wrapped around my body.

"Thanks to the sun it feels like being surrounded by milk. The pitch black darkness has changed to white darkness."

"White darkness..."

He had an unkind expression, for while Conrad made an unkind expression, he fell silent for a while. After that he reluctantly asked me.

"But how did you end up like this. Did you somehow damage your eyeball or optic nerves? For example, did some insect enter your eyes or were you hit by stones or mud."

"hmmm... I can't remember anything like that. But if something happened while I was fast asleep then, maybe I rolled over in my sleep and hit my head somewhere... my eyesight might return if I'm hit with the same force again."

"Isn't that memory loss."

"Maybe its a change in personality. It could be something else altogether."

The light gray human form slightly moved up and down. He heaved his shoulders and let out a not so serious sigh.

"Its alright, its alright. I will..."

"Stop"

Wait! Without letting him finish his sentence I placed my palm near his face. As usual he was going to say some cool dialogue refreshingly that would make your whole body itchy.

"You don't need to say it Conrad. Your eyes are your own, I have these two eyes... right now. They're right here, aren't there?"

"Yes. Its my favorite black."

"That's right, its more than enough. By the way we are making the guys on top wait for quite some time. Isn't Hazel considerably shot tempered?"

Right at that time someone was looking into the hole. When they came close to the light source the colour of their shadow darkened.

"Hurry, climb up alone."

"huh"

The voice in my memory echoed.

"Alone, by myself?"

"This voice is coming from the people above right. Did they bring an interpreter? That will be of great help to rescue Jason and Freddy, its a good thing to have many people who have mutual understanding... Conrad?"

When I realized the surrounding atmosphere had changed, without realizing I started whispering.

"Did something happen?"

"Shhh! Your majesty, please step back a little. This is very strange, why would they need to call out to us... that too they said to climb up alone."

Conrad pulled me behind again and shadowed me so that they wouldn't be able to see me from above. Come to think of it, earlier Hazel said the same thing.

"Hurry and climb up alone."

"Hazel and the others know that there are two of us. There must be some reason why she's emphasizing on 'alone'".

"Did Saralegui do something sly again?"

"That's not possible, because I have tied him up properly."

"But what if Shou Shimaron's reinforcements or search party come to rescue him..."

"They won't be able to find him so easily."

Just by his nonchalant way of speaking, I realized. Bag... you stuffed Sara in a bag, didn't you Conrad. But after that "Exploring the amusing underground passage tour with dark Saralegui" I just cannot bring myself to side with him. Its best if he stays stuffed inside that bag for now.

"This is very strange. I'll go on ahead and see the situation. Your majesty, please stay put here, do you get it, no matter what do not come a place which is visible from above."

After thinking a little he continued.

"Of course please don't even think of climbing up unnecessarily. Please don't do anything reckless till your eyesight recovers. Going to the veranda or kitchen is also forbidden."

"All right... wait, you're gradually becoming like my mother."

With my vision like a pigment's thin thermography, if I jump in middle of disaster stricken party, instead of being of any help I'll end up dragging them down. I'll just wait here quietly. I'll crouch here and wait stooping down so that no one can find me.

But harsh roars and cliches which sound intimidating no matter how you listen to them are being exchanged on the ground which I watched quietly from behind. Words said like this are universal, you can understand them just by the feel.

I heard about it later but at that time the situation on the surface was like this.

When Conrad climbed the rope and looked from the hole, Hazel and the others and the closed bag were in a hold-up state, what's more they were surrounded by all sides, looks like there were men riding horses with a projectile weapon in their hands.

The attackers who fought for the supremacy and continued their struggle near the royal tomb were equestrian people. Indistinguishable from the sand in the desert they wore a yellowish gray cape and a hood of the same colour which covered everything up to their eyes that you couldn't even read their expressions. They positioned the crossbow like projectile weapons at chin level, ten people aimed at Hazel and the others while the remaining ten targeted Conrad.

Thanks to Conrad hiding in the hole like a prairie dog, before they could fire the pseudo-crossbow like weapons pointed at Hazel and the others, they immediately changed to plan B as soon as he tried to draw back his head,

Plan B, the rabbit that was pretending to be bitten. In other words, waiting for an opportunity while pretending to obey them.

He showed no intentions of resisting them, came out of the hole and joined the captives.

I, who knew nothing, was waiting like a good boy for them to tell me its ok to climb up. While I was waiting for their reply, exchange of unruly words had already begun on the ground.

After much of Seisakoku language, I could hear Conrad's reply.

"That was me!"

As soon as they interpret, I can hear Seisakoku language again. This time in a calm voice he replied.

"I'm alone."

Just by this conversation I couldn't affirm what Conrad was being asked. There is a possibility that the question was "Is this hat German?" or "Are you married?" However if you speculate from the tone of the people using Seisakoku language, the contents don't seem so friendly.

Those guys suspect whether there still might be some allies in the underground or not.

Although their suspicions are right, there's only a high school boy underground who can't even fight.

What should I do? While only listening to half their conversation I was lost.

Should I appear in front of them like a man or should I just stay put in the shadows like Conrad asked me to. I don't think the situation will improve by me going to the surface. But what will I do if in the worst case scenario my comrades blame me for not showing up?

While I was worrying about it the situation on the scene changed drastically.

Guessing only by the sound, people and horses, looks like both their numbers have increased suddenly. Are they the companions of the attackers, or are they the comrades of Hazel who continue the grass-root activities in the desert, or has a third force stormed in to create even more chaos.

Screams and angry voices echoing one after the other, they eventually merged. A sharp sound of something cutting through the air, the sound of heavy weapons clashing against each other, the sound of hooves stamping on the sand. The neigh of the horses. There's no doubt, unlike the leisurely atmosphere up till a while ago, its changing into a harsh battlefield above.

Along with a dull sound, something came down on the ground right in front of my eyes. From what I heard it seemed heavy and soft, for my mental health I went to confirm.

But thanks to him coming down and the rope swinging, I confirmed the path necessary to cross in order to reach the surface. A person is coming down with the help of that rope.

"Co..."

I shut my mouth and took a step back to where the sunlight couldn't reach. A triangular distorted shadow was hanging in the air, from one hand he stretched an elongated shadow. He most probably drew out his sword. His hem flutters when the wind blows. Maybe its the cloak that covers his whole body.

No, its not Conrad, he wasn't wearing these clothes.

I need to hide. Although I indented to follow my the orders given by my brain, I was a little late. Looks like the man who came down has spotted me. Stepping on pebbles he's coming this side.

My vision is getting pitch black as I run to the darkness that thins out the light coming from the ground and lean against a stone-wall.

Give up! Get out before I to come and find you! My breathing is becoming shallow and rapid, a cold sweat flows down my spine. My pulse raced like an alarm.

I don't have a weapon, even my eyesight hasn't recovered. If I'm attacked by the enemy in such a situation I can barely resist. Of course, even under normal circumstances I'm no match for a soldier. Escaping is just a matter of whether you're fast or not.

However my prayer was in vain, the man who had come down step foot even in the darkness. The last of the sunlight sparkled on the weapon held in his right hand.

A small star appeared to be afloat for a moment and then disappeared.

The opponent was gradually closing on the distance as I tried to conceal my breadth. I can hear him breathing close by. Still five more steps to go, four steps, three...

"...tsk!"

Jumping over the remaining two steps the enemy suddenly took a swing at me. It was a do or die situation, I threw my body to the right and rolled on the dry cold ground. Sparks flew from the stone wall that had the remnants of my body temperature from being hit by a heavy weapon.

This is no joke, is he trying to kill me, does he intend to kill me!? Me who is neither a warrior nor a soldier but a high school student? A mere soldier is trying to injure me...

Its that feeling again. The frustrating feeling that my throat, my mouth belong to someone else's body as well at the same time.

"...Despite being a mere soldier, you dare to try and harm me...?"

The second attack cut through the air. I twisted my body and while avoiding even the wind caused by the sword I turned towards my assailants back in half a step. I gave him a blow on the spine with my elbow. If he is half or one step away, whether he can see it or not, I can attack him. Its only a question of whether I manage to land a direct hit him or not. Our situation is the same, even he shouldn't be able to see clearly. But if the enemy is a skilled soldier who is accustomed to using swords then even in the dark he should be able to fight picking up signs from his opponent. However he has only one weak point.

The enemy doesn't know the position of the wall.

Although my opponent didn't have a prey to swing at, he had a splendid sword. If the blade hits my flesh, it will pierce and cut right through but if it hits a rock, it will have some impact on the wielder and cause damage. By chance if it breaks and rolls down it will no longer be of any use. If I pick it up, I can use it against the enemy.

My opponent's blade swooped from the bottom, grazed my right side and hit the rock. It broke and split into two parts while emitting a loud noise which didn't seem to be that of a metal. The part with the hilt was in the hands of the enemy, while the other half with the sharp edge came spinning at high speed, hit my toes and stopped there.

Why did my body naturally carry out a move that I have never even learnt before, how did such a counter attack method come to my mind all of a sudden, I myself did not find it strange. However more faster than thinking with my brain, I stepped on the edge of the blade and with the tip of my shoe raised it slightly.

The cold piece of metal was within my hand's reach.

I couldn't afford to worry about my palm. The same goes for my enemy. He is coming at me to swing with the broken sword which doesn't have a tip. Even I gripped the bare blade and quickly gave a horizontal swipe. The meal which was originally one sword, hurt two men at the same time.

A hot stimulus ran through my right shoulder and there undoubtedly was some reaction in my left hand.

My opponent's body suddenly kneeled over. The air which was filled with the smell of rusty iron surged towards me.

However finding the scent I certainly remember within it puzzled me. It wasn't only the blood.

"Wolf...?"

"Yu"

The body that had collapsed in my arms slowly turned.

"Wolfram!?"

"...Yuuri"

My sleeves and palms were completely drenched in some warm liquid. Wolfram's heaviness profoundly weighed down on my shoulders. While embracing him, I kneeled down on the ground miserably.

"I couldn't see, really, I didn't know!"

"Even me. I heard an unfamiliar voice... its not your... fault"

"Wolf!"

Everyone tells me that it's not my fault.

But in reality, everything is my fault.

# Short story - Who is His Majesty the Maou's Bride!?

## Who is His Majesty the Maou's Bride!?

花嫁は誰のマウ!?



By the time I think 'Uh-oh', it's already too late.

A salaryman desperately rushing down the stairs with an expression of panic collides straight in Murata and me. Just like that the two of us lose our balance, and tumble down the stairs from a height of twenty-five steps.

My name is Shibuya Yuuri. I never got off the train at Harajuku.

Today I was supposed to meet my friend at the turnstiles of a nearby train station in our district.

The time is 13 February, Saturday, 5.17pm.

I'm usually punctual, but this is a rare occasion where I'm two minutes late, hurriedly racing up the stairs, slippery from the snow yesterday, two steps at a time.

Murata Ken, who was in the same class at me during our second and third years of junior high, is wearing a super cute camel-colored double-breasted coat, together with a black scarf. Perhaps he realized I'm not at the turnstiles, so he is climbing down the stairs to look for me.

I remember he just finished his mock exams. He's carrying his bag on his left shoulder, hurrying on his way unsteadily with one arm swinging.

"STOP, Murata! Careful, your eyes will fog up!"

"Nope, you got it wrong, Shibuya. It's the other way around, the other way, it only fogs up when I go from somewhere cold to somewhere warm, or when I'm eating ramen..."

His foot lands on the platform in the middle of the stairs just as he says that.

I grab the handrail and bend down, desperately trying to suck the icy cold air into my lungs.

"Yo... Sorry, I'm late..."

"You're not late."

"But you know, I was the one who wanted you to follow me to the bookstore! In that case I should have been here fifteen minutes earlier, waiting for you at the place we agreed on, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

Murata's gaze looks surprised beyond his glasses, and he pats me twice on the back, my aviator's jacket making a dry sound.

"When you take me to a baseball game, you never say such considerate things!"

"That's because you really enjoyed watching the ballgame too, right?"

In contrast, no matter how you look at it, calling a friend to help me choose

reference books is nobody's idea of a good time.

We decide to find a place to get warm first, then only scour all the bookshops around the station.

...This is all thanks to those embarrassing results from the term test.

The person who got such unsightly scores, is naturally yours truly. Those were the most unbearable scores I've gotten since I went to high school, plus the year-end exams are just around the corner, the results of which will decide whether or not I will have to experience the first year of high school all over again.

In other words, I may have to—r-r-r-repeat a grade!?

Brrr, just saying those words is scary.

But I do have my reasons. After all, in the past year, I was in an environment that didn't allow me to focus on my studies. Not only was I sent to an alternate world through an unbelievable manner, I even suddenly became Demon King. The place I journeyed to had many conflicts and battles waiting for me, and I was even forced to face off with the leaders of large countries without any prior mental preparation.

As a high school student whose head is filled with nothing but baseball, I had to bear the brunt of diplomatic problems.

And there are a ton of problems in the country itself, so an underage brat who can't even vote like me, had to figure out how to dissuade those people who wanted to resort to violence.

Anyway, the baseball boy of only sixteen years old, has been living such a cruel life for the past year.

Where will I find the time to study!

"About that~~ I know exactly what your situation is, maybe that's why your results fell."

When I told him of the crisis I was facing, that was how Murata answered me from the other side of the phone. Still, he was swept into the affairs of the other world as a major player too, and his results haven't been affected in the slightest.

“But you haven’t told your parents, right?”

“How do I tell them? Do you want me to say, “Mom, Dad, thank you for caring for me all these years, I’m an impressive king now”? How do you expect me to say that!?”

“In that case, you won’t be able to get their pity.”

“Nothing I can do about that—But compared to my parents, the biggest problem is my brother!”

Maybe it’s the Shibuya family’s educational way, but my parents never had much of an opinion when it came to their kids’ results at school. My brother is the completely opposite of my parents, though, and always loved to pick on his little brother’s results since elementary school.

He will check my exam papers or report cards before Mom does, and then start nagging about how I got a few marks less than last time, or how I didn’t reach the average score for the year, finally coming up with comments that defy science like ‘You are a low grade clone of me’. In other words he will just keep scolding his little brother for my bad results.

And now if I really have to repeat a grade, who knows what gaze that guy will look at me with.

“...My brother will definitely kill me.”

“No way!”

“Even if he doesn’t kill me, he will call me the shame or the black mark of the Shibuya family, and trample my dignity into the ground. He even thinks I’m an obstacle to his making it big in life, so he might even exile me to a faraway island.”

“Exile to a faraway island--?”

“For all you know I may even start writing songs on that island, and those songs will be made into an album that is widely talked about after I die.”

“That’s pretty good, too!”

“That’s not good at all! If that happens I’ll be under house arrest on a deserted island, and will never get to watch a ballgame again, y’know!? If that happens I

won't be able to see the development of Ito's long term management [1], and when he completely conquers the game and is raised into the air in celebration, I won't be able to cry with him, will I!? It's okay even if I wasn't first in the preliminaries, as long as the team can choose me... Forget it... This is a dream that won't come true even if I don't repeat a grade... Anyway, if my brother finds out I repeated a grade, it's very likely that I will never see you again."

"So I'm actually that far behind? Whatever, which part do you want me to help you with? I think freshmen mathematics only gets hard in the second semester."

"...Please help me study everything since spring when we started school."

There is a few seconds of silence on the other end of the phone, until Murata yells, "Didn't you realize your problem way too late--!"

Just like that, before I can handle my own brother, I first obtained my friend's sympathy. It's late in the ninth inning with two outs, so in order to turn the tables and bat a safe, I have no choice but to ask for help.

I'm not hoping for a home run, just a hit on the line. Even a touch or a foul from the other side is okay. In other words as long as I can avoid the nightmare of repeating a grade, I'm happy.

So I asked Murata, who had to go for a mock exam at his cram school on Saturday, to follow me to get reference books. We were supposed to meet at 5.15pm, because large bookstores tend to be around train stations, so I thought it would be more efficient to meet outside the turnstiles.

That's right, we were supposed to meet at the turnstiles, not the stairs.

"Do you want to go eat something first? You've been using your brain all day, surely you're exhausted?"

"Mn—Not really. It's just that tonight my dad's coming back from Hong Kong, I haven't seen him for three months..."

A second after I heard that, that man rushing down the stairs collides into Murata and me.

That man is wearing a very common camel-colored coat over his suit, not even bothering to button up. He has a briefcase underneath one arm, his other hand pushing his glasses back up his nose. Maybe he's in a hurry, because he's looking at his watch as he runs. That's why he never noticed the two high school students in front of him, and crashes right into us.

By the time I think 'Uh-oh', it's already too late.

My sole falls past the line on the end of the step that's supposed to prevent slipping, and both my feet float in mid-air. Murata's body weight plus the momentum land squarely on my body, and my fingers instantly leave the silver railing, though I still had three fingers trying desperately to hold on.

"...gonna..."

I want to yell "we're gonna fall", but I can't breathe through the anxiety, so I can't make a sound either.

An intense pain comes from my back. The pain continues traveling to my shoulders, my upper arms and waist, only reaching my calves after a while. Just like that, Murata and I tumble down the stairs together.

...Hey ...Hey ...Wake up...

My consciousness blurry, I dazedly think.

This is 'that', that 'Hey~ I poke' game my mom loves to play so much. If you turn around when someone yells 'Hey~', your face will be poked by that person's index finger. How annoying~~! It's all Yuu-chan's fault for having such a cute round face, Mommy just loves to pinch it! But your little heart must feel dissatisfied, huh? Eh? This shouldn't be called "Hey~ I poke", it should be "Hey~ Yuu-chan", right? I'll use that when I think up another game, then.

“Hey~ You two, are you okay?”

If I turn my head just like that, I’ll just make my childish mother even happier. So I decide to feint sleep, until they lose their patience.

Maybe it’s because she’s given up, because the young woman’s voice sounds worried,

“It’s not working, I can’t seem to wake him. Could someone call one of the station’s workers here?”

“Wouldn’t it be faster to call the ambulance?”

Ambulance!?

I think, “You don’t have to go that far, right? If you really call an ambulance, I’ll have to repeat the grade for sure!” Although I want to get up immediately, I can’t. Because my back and waist both hurt like anything.

“Ah, it’s too hard to get up immediately. After all, you two fell down the stairs.”

“...Sta...irs?”

My consciousness finally returns to reality. That’s right, a careless salaryman crashed straight into Murata and me, so the two of us fell down the stairs of the train station together.

“Oh, right, Murata.”

I don’t know which joint in my body got dislocated, because my vision is all blurry. Eventually the two friendly ladies help me up, and I finally get onto my feet.

“Your friend’s still out cold. But he’s still breathing, and his heart is beating too, so he should be okay.”

“Urk—Thank you for your kindness... Ouch...”

“Ah, sorry, does it hurt here?”

An unknown fragrance wafts over, and I actually get butterflies in my stomach.

Hold on a sec, right now I should make sure Murata is okay first, right? But I still can’t see properly, so I start desperately massaging my eyes, what on earth

is happening? Could I have knocked my head? My eyes are obviously open, so why is my vision so blurry that I can't even see my surroundings properly?

"Ah, you're looking for your glasses, right? They're right here! Don't you move for now, I'll put them on for you."

Outside of the optometrist's, I never had a woman help me put on glasses before. No, wait! My vision in both eyes is 2.0, this should be my first time ever, right?

"Sorry for the trouble, I really don't know how to thank you... Waa, it's me! Am I okay!?"

After some adjusting, my blurry vision turns abruptly clear, and the first thing I see in front of me is my body—lying on the floor, even, while the other young lady in a mini skirt has my head on her lap, making me a little jealous.

I walk up to myself, shaking myself with a trembling hand,

"Why does it seem like my condition is worse! Hey, am I okay? Did I knock somewhere!? The hand I'm used to isn't broken, is it? Right, uh—Where's Murata..."

Mn?

Wait, calm down, Shibuya Yuuri.

The one lying on the floor, is definitely me. That's the Shibuya Yuuri I've been used to seeing in the mirror for sixteen years. It's just that I'm used to practicing my batting in the mirror, so I only remember how I look like in my uniform.

Then, right now who is the person desperately shaking the unconscious Shibuya Yuuri? I clasp my hands tightly together and then pull them apart, this body is moving according to my instructions.

"...Strange?"

That's strange--?

Just then, beside me I start groaning softly, blinking a few times and then opening my eyes.

"...Why..."

Just as I'm at a loss about how to address myself, Shibuya Yuuri's mouth asks,

"Why am I... staring at myself... now?"

"I"? Who is the "I" my mouth is talking about!?

"Could it be Murata!?"

Of course it could be, it is Murata.

"...U-unbelievable. How did things get to this?"

Sitting in McDonalds with a bunch of heart-shaped decoration flying everywhere, I sigh for the fiftieth time. There's a cooling paper cup of coffee on the table, and Murata Ken is sitting on the opposite of me.

I should say, Murata Ken with the appearance of Shibuya Yuuri.

"This is amazing, I can see everything so clearly. Who knew that I could see so clearly without glasses or contacts—Waa~~ This feels so fresh."

"Now isn't the time to be awed—"

The person with my body and Murata's soul is looking around happily. I see, I didn't think I could have that kind of expression.

"And this body feels so light, too."

"Well, my butt and waist hurt like hell, as though I hit the same place a ton of times."

"I'm guessing it must be because your reflexes and fitness levels are better, so you instinctively protected yourself. While I just fell all the way down, so I bet your body must be covered in bruises now! Later I'll tell you where I keep my health card, tomorrow we'll go to the hospital together..."

"Don't..."

I splay myself over the table with the wooden pattern, the warm camel-colored coat sticking to my face.

"Don't say it so calmly, would you--! And you're using my face, my voice, saying

‘I, me, my’, it’s so weird to listen to! It feels like I suddenly became a sissy, it feels horrible! And that’s obviously my voice, my voice! It’s obviously me--!”

“Calm down, Shibuya. You acting like this will make people assume we’re some con group, you know!”

I raise my head hastily to see how others are looking at us, but all I see is a bunch of fog and nothing else.

“Damn—Why do these glasses fog over so quickly!”

“Oh dear, don’t get so agitated.”

Murata raises my hand to lightly tap my... I mean, Murata’s arm. What a mess. This is such a mess.

“I say, Murata, how can I not be agitated? Do you know what’s happened to us? Our souls switched! Inside my body is Murata Ken, and even though your body is speaking with your voice, the person that’s actually talking is me!?”

“All right, all right, of course I know that. It was probably the impact of our fall down the stairs that caused our souls to switch. This sort of thing is completely common.”

“Completely common? Ah!”

Through the lenses that have finally cleared up, I realize that everyone is looking at us strangely. I hurriedly lower my voice, putting one hand beside my mouth as I say,

“How can you still be so calm? Something as unscientific and unrealistic as this, how can this be common?”

“But it is really common! I remember it was in Doraemon, something about swapping mandarins and dried fish. Obayashi Nobuhiko<sup>[2]</sup> switched before too, right? But that time they switched genders too, now that was a mess—”

Murata thinks his cold joke about “mandarins and dried fish” is not bad, so he starts laughing with Shibuya Yuuri’s face. That’s another new discovery, so that’s how I look when I laugh.

“Doraemon switched using his tools, so that can be explained with science, right?”

It can, right? Probably, I believe it definitely can.

“But we have no evidence or foreshadowing, we just switched after we fell down the stairs, right? And the most important thing is, what do we do next? If we tell anyone else that I look like Murata Ken but my true identity is Shibuya Yuuri, do you think the people around us will believe that?”

“Mn, probably not. Ah~~ Shibuya, the so-called body switching tends to be a short-term thing. No matter how long the time, we’ll just have to hang in there for a few weeks and we’ll probably switch back...”

“But what if we don’t switch back!?”

I hold my head in frustration. The feeling in my fingertips tells me that Murata’s hair is naturally curly.

“If the situation doesn’t change... Oh, yeah, the exams are right around the corner! That’s crucial to whether or not I can move on to the next grade! And you have exams too, right... Mn, wait a sec! In that case Murata will be taking the exam in my place... That way I should be able to avoid the danger of repeating a grade... Ah~~ No way no way! That’s just like having someone take the exam for me, just like cheating it’s not allowed! The person taking the exam is me, but not the real me!”

“Shibuya’s personality is as straightforward as ever.”

Murata drinks the cold coffee. There’s a lot of milk added into the paper cup, so instead of black, it looks more like milk-coffee color.

“And if I go to your school for exams, the results will definitely be tragic. After all you study at a celebrity school, just taking any exam simply will get you into Tokyo University... It’s over, it’s really all over. I will definitely fail, and leave an eternal single digit result on your report card... Not just that, if I cause the genius Murata Ken to repeat a grade, how will I face your parents!”

“My results for the first two semesters are not bad, so one failure won’t make me repeat a grade. And I told you so many times already, in-school exams have nothing to do with university entrance exams. Even if I can’t make it to the second year, I might as well pretend that I re-took a year, right? Relax, don’t think so much. Once we get back to normal, I’ll definitely be able to catch up.

And even if I get expelled, I can still go for the university entrances exams, no problem!"

"Murata..."

As we talk, I can't help but grip Shibuya Yuuri's hand tightly. I discover yet something else—a baseball boy's fingers aren't at all nice to touch.

"You are such a good person~"

"Thank you for the praise."

"By the way, Murata do you bat and throw with your right hand?"

"I think my body isn't that good for playing baseball—"

Anyway there's no point in overthinking this. Now all we can do is try our best to transform into each other, then calmly see what happens. When I forcefully come to that conclusion, a sense of weariness suddenly sweeps over me. Come to think of it, Murata's body just went through the torture of a mock exam. Compared to Shibuya Yuuri, who spent the entire cold winter day sweating buckets, the tiredness of using his brain must be one step higher.

I'm still wearing the double-breasted coat that shouldn't fit me as I lean my entire body on the chair.

"Mrgh—So tired, why am I so tired."

"About that, although it's no wonder, after all you did go through some trauma."

"Mn... Ah—After I relaxed, the biological needs start showing up. I'm going to take a wee."

"Ah, I want to go too."

After throwing away the paper coffee cup and papers, I carry my bag and push open the toilet door. To deal with the current situation, we need to exchange information about each other's families. At least tonight, if a little worse then tomorrow night, in the worst case scenario we may even have to live in each other's shoes for weeks.

I am Murata, Murata is me... Ahh~~ This won't work, I keep feeling as though I

heard this line somewhere before.

“Speaking of which, Shibuya, what’s your dog called? Flanders?”

“Do you think my house is ‘Dog of Flanders’<sup>[3]</sup>? Sigh—But winter sure is annoying, if the weather is too cold, it’s so troublesome just leaving the house...”

As we’re standing side by side in front of the urinal covered in yellow beads, and finally manage to pull our zips down with the hands we warmed at the heater... I suddenly realize something.

“Ah!”

“W-what happened!? Why d’you suddenly make such a weird sound, Shibuya! If I don’t hold on properly I can’t aim well!”

“Wait a sec, Murata, I’m standing here because I want to pee, s-so I must use this hand to hold your... in other words, Murata Ken’s excretory organ? And this isn’t something immediate either, as I’m peeing, I have to keep~ on holding someone else’s bird. Waa~~ What to do, I don’t want to hold it! I’d rather be beaten to death!”

I stare beside me and sigh again. Because Murata has started peeing.

“Waa, you’re holding my... Yaa! Don’t look! Don’t keep looking down and comparing sizes!”



“Why the heck are you saying such childish things? Everyone has to go to the toilet, right? Keeping it in for too long is bad for the body, at a time like this, we don’t have a choice, right?”

“But won’t you at least refuse a bit? T-that’s mine! Uwoo, oh god—don’t swing it!”

“On the other hand you shouldn’t copy me and sway your body, got it?”

Compared to my friend who solved the pressing issue instantly, I just can’t bring myself to do it. The problem is as my need to pee gets more intense, my brain gets even more confused.

“Mrgh, Murata’s holding my...”

“You’re making too much of a fuss over nothing, isn’t this hand yours too? Alright, if you want to pee just get it over with now. Don’t bother too much over whose bird this is! Otherwise just pretend you’re practicing how to take care of patients, won’t that work? Pretend you’re helping an old man go to the toilet. Just keep calm and grab it, then you won’t feel like it’s anything.”

“...I don’t want to keep calm and do something like this.”

“Well, what else do you want, do you want me to help you--? You wouldn’t want that either, right?”

Murata scratches his head impatiently, pointing at the white door,

“Go inside the cubicle to pee!”

“What--!? You want me to pee sitting down!?”

Even if we’re like lovers in front of a hotel, saying things like “I’m a little worried, why don’t you stay” or “I don’t want to go home tonight” to try to hold each other back, Murata Ken still can’t spend the night in the Shibuya household. In other words, the fusion of Murata’s body and my soul has no choice to return to my (Murata’s) house.

“I remember that the father who hasn’t been home for three months is coming back tonight. It’s just that he’s flying off to goodness knows where again tomorrow.”

Apparently Murata's father, who does something IT-related in Hong Kong, and his lawyer mother who stays in a short-term apartment in Tokyo, spending every night in the firm, both only come home once in a blue moon. The way things are, he has no choice but to go home tonight. To the father, he can finally return to his own warm home, so he must really miss his beloved only son.

But that also means he's usually a high school student who stays on his own. To me, who has an older brother sticking his nose into everything at home, I really can't imagine what kind of life he leads. Your family environment is 180 degrees different from mine.

I stand at the door to the tall building, exhaling white breaths.

Although I've remembered all the basic bits of knowledge beforehand, if anything unexpected happens, I'll still be unsettled. Still, I have no choice but to face two adults I meet for the first time and pretend to be a family.

At first I wanted to call Murata (who looks like Shibuya Yuuri on the outside) to follow me back, but today is one of those rare days where the whole family can get together, it'd be too awkward for a stranger to stick himself in the middle. And anyway, if the father he hasn't seen for three months treats me like a real son in front of him, it would probably hurt Murata's heart, right? No, well, the body is his son, that's for sure. Since his father doesn't know the truth, that's only normal... But psychologically speaking, even I would feel very lonely.

“...I’m back—”

I finally manage to open the automatic lock, and get ready to pull open the door that Murata told me is the right number, but the door is locked. Well, that's unsurprising, since it's not been very safe lately. I look at the lamplight coming out of the windows, thinking that his parents should both be back by now, so I push the intercom and wait for someone to open the door, my heart a little... No, considerably nervous.

“A random ‘Good evening’ would be really weird, but ‘How are you’ is really funny instead.”

...It's been a long time, and no one has opened the door for me yet.

I press again, and wait for a long time more, but there still isn't any response.

So I throw it all to the winds and press ten times in quick succession. Finally someone opens the lock from inside, but I feel like immediately escaping the scene instead. It feels like I'm one of those criminals who rings and runs.

“What are you doing!”

The woman who pokes her head out isn't asking a question. I've started out on the wrong foot, and swallow back the greeting that almost escapes my mouth.

“Ah, the door...”

“Don't you have the key?”

There is indeed a bunch of keys in the coat pocket.

I think to myself, “Could all other families be like this?” as I take off my shoes at the foyer, completely missing the chance to say “I'm back”.

The woman who went in just now and looks a lot like Murata's mother, just as I expected, was wearing glasses. Her short neat hair is dyed brown, and she wears makeup even at home, looking at first glance like Takashima Reiko<sup>[4]</sup> ten years later. She's the complete opposite of my mother, the perfect image of a professional woman. If I had to face her in work, she would seem to be a troublesome opponent, and she doesn't seem to care overly much for her son either. Just thinking that this is just right for me to deal with, I quietly heave a sigh of relief.

I take off the coat in the high school student's room on the left of the foyer, spending a bit of time at the sink washing my hands. When I raise my head, the mirror reflects my<sup>[5]</sup> face.

Murata Ken.

Alright, Murata. It's time to make a decision! No, I should be the one making a decision. After this I'll have to have a touching reunion with the father who was away for three months.

So I prepare myself mentally and walk into the living room, only to see an uncle in a white shirt sitting on the sofa. He's all focused on reading the newspaper, so all I see is the back of a head with thinning hair. That uncle... No, how can I call him 'that', this salaryman is obviously Murata's father.

“Um...”

“Ah.”

His father raises his face from the papers by about 3 cm, looking at what should be his most beloved only son, but only for a moment, turning his gaze back to the paper in no time. Maybe it's because he's a multinational employee, so he must always pay attention to what's happening in society; or maybe he hasn't been in Japan for too long, so he's desperate to catch up on domestic news.

If I have to use one line to describe what characteristics I caught in that short time, I would say he's a lot like Sada Masashi:<sup>[6]</sup> 30% fatter.

So if Sada Masashi and Takashima Reiko got married, their kid would have Murata Ken's brains and looks...

“Uh—”

Now there's a huge problem.

I don't know how to address the father I haven't seen for so long.

Taking Murata's personality into account, 'Mom' and 'Pops' don't seem too proper. In that case, it's either just 'Dad', 'Papa' or 'Father', right? Or like a high school freshman calling 'Daddy'... It may be 'Daddy', for all I know it could really be 'Daddy'—

So I make a decision, and slowly approach Sada Masashi.

“Ah—Uh—That... It's been a while.”

What am I saying?

“Hm? Yeah, it's been a while.”

The problem is his voice doesn't sound like folk songs, and instead is a very powerful bass. I can't help but be pressed down by the minister-level pressure, and even say weird things,

“T-thank you for your three months of hard work.”

Hey hey hey, I'm not acting out 'the Crime Boss' Wife'<sup>[7]</sup>!

Father raises the head he had buried in the newspapers, looking at his own son in all seriousness. Those goody-goody guy eyes are wide behind his retro-looking glasses. Perfect~ now's the time! I can't miss this chance, to talk to him properly! The most important thing is to take the initiative. I sit on the bright yellow sofa, trying to find a way to talk to him even if I don't know him well.

"How's Hong Kong? Is Hong Kong yamcha nice? Did you see Jackie Chan?"

"Same as always."

Impossible~ Don't say 'same as always'! Since you went for three months, tell me about what you saw..."

"Ken!"

Although someone yells my name impatiently, for a moment I don't notice who that person is calling. But still I immediately remember my character, turning around to look at the owner of the voice—only to see Murata's mother with files all over the dining table, tapping the table with a pen cover,

"If you have to talk, would you please go somewhere else? I can't concentrate like this."

"Eh? Ah, sorry."

"Your mother brought her work home again."

Father whispers to a confused-looking me. Looks like professional woman these days all believe in bringing their work home to finish.

"If there's nothing else, go back to your room and study?"

"Eh? But dinner..."

"You haven't eaten yet!?"

I got shocked by them as well. What the heck, since your family always eats out, why didn't you tell me earlier? I thought their whole family was looking forward to this reunion after three months, and would definitely eat around the table together! I even thought of saying that although there isn't the smell of anything cooking, maybe they were going to call for sushi delivery or something.

"Geez, don't you usually eat before coming home? Or you would buy

something on the way back... Now you tell me suddenly you want to have dinner, I'll tell you I didn't cook a thing, you know!"

"Ah! It's okay, it's okay, it's okay! I'll just buy something from the convenience store! Is there anything you want me to get on the way?"

I was too naïve, to think I wanted to eat the food Takashima Reiko made.

I put on the camel-colored coat I just took off, running to the corridor outside the door. After dashing into the lift, I finally heave a sigh of relief. His family is harder to deal with than I thought, if this goes on for a few weeks, I might lose my mind to the mental wear-out.

After making sure that the keys and wallet are all in my pocket, I walk past the utterly silent entrance. Since I forgot to put on a scarf, my face and neck are in direct contact with the cold February air. I remember that if I turn the corner 200m ahead, there seems to be the light from a convenience store.

Just then I realize there's someone walking over here, so I lower my head. If that person stays in the same building, the least I could do is say hi. If I gave Murata a bad name in the time I'm using his body, that'd be bad. I look forward slightly, and realize that she's a girl about my age. She's wearing a coat over her uniform and a scarf around her neck, but no socks underneath her checkered skirt. I feel cold just looking at her, and can't help but shrink my shoulders when I brush past her.

"Murata-kun."

What!?

Yet again someone calls me out of nowhere. I make some unintelligible noise and stop my footsteps, pointing at my chin using my finger and confirming with her,

"Are you calling me?"

"That's right, who else would I be calling?"

She's holding her bag with both hands, standing in front of me. Her face is red in the icy wind, her shoulder-length hair blowing lightly in the wind as well. She's one of those you see in every class, the girl that looks like a class representative.

She has a pair of large eyes, unwilling to admit defeat.

“Weren’t you supposed to spend the day with me?”

“Eh?”

Now that it’s come to this, I can’t just ask her, “May I know who you are?”

“You should be hanging out with me, but why did you go back first? And you only used a simple text message to reject me, is my existence that meaningless to Murata-kun?”

“H-hold on a sec!”

Class Rep (for now) puts her hand into the bag and pulls out a box. From the cute packaging unique to the season, I can obviously tell those are February 14 chocolates.

“Since I can’t meet you tomorrow, I thought of giving this to you after school today. And I had the present all prepared and ready, too!”

“Hold on a sec!”

Hold on a—sec!

Class Rep (for now), give me some time to think. Although Valentine’s Day is tomorrow, but because you can’t see Murata tomorrow, so you planned on giving him chocolates today, right? You agreed to meet after school, and prepared the chocolates, right? Just for this confession.

But who do you want to confess to? Who are the chocolates for?

“Murata-kun!”

“A-are you calling me!?”

“Of course I’m calling you, don’t act dumb, will you?”

Why do accidents always fall unnoticed? I thought I just avoided complicated parent-child relations, but the next thing I face is actually a Valentine Eve’s confession? Speaking of which, such a cute girl wants to confess to you, so why the heck did you bail out on her!?

Right here and right now, what kind of an attitude am I supposed to face her with!?

“Give me an answer.”

“Uh... Even if you want me to, I can’t give you an answer.”

I think an excuse like “I’m not actually Murata Ken” won’t work, and even if I’ve been pretending to be Murata from start to finish, I can’t simply give a reply. After all, what men like in the opposite sex can be as different as heaven and earth, so even if she fits my standards, she may not be the type Murata likes. No matter how good they look, girls who are too hot-tempered will get three strikes and they’re out... No no no, since she looks so cute, I could pretend not to notice her personality.

Class Rep (for now) frowns anxiously, holding the chocolate box tightly.

“Murata-kun!”

“Sorry, I can’t simply say something irresponsible... Ah!”

I’m fast losing track of what she’s asking me, when I hear the tune from Thunderbirds, and something in the pocket in front of my chest starts vibrating.

“Excuse me, let me answer this call.”

From the cellphone warmed with body heat comes the voice of the friend I just parted with,

“Shibuya?”

“Murata!? Ah, that’s not right, I’m Murata.”

I react happily like a child and hurriedly lower my voice. After all the girl beside me doesn’t know that we swapped bodies.

“Ah—perfect, come out quick. It’s really cold here, I’m in a public phone booth. I thought of something really important, but I can’t call you at home—the atmosphere in your house is really very warm, but your brother is nagging drunk in front of the telephone. He won’t even let me use the other phone—”

The big brother of the Shibuya household is actively looking for a partner, participating in group dates non-stop this month.

“Ignore him.”

“But he’s still making a fuss, asking me to call him Onii-chan.”

“Don’t listen to him, that guy has played too many eroge [8].”

“He says that if I don’t call him that, he won’t give me the sports papers he bought at the station.”

“Then just call him once! Now’s not the time for all this, all this isn’t important. Mu... No, AMIGO, you’re in the middle of something really important now!”

“What is it, AMIGO?”

You don’t have to copy the way I address you.

“After hearing this you sure will be in for a shock! But don’t be surprised yet, calmly hear me out—There’s a girl confessing to you!”

I try my best to lower my voice, but my friend doesn’t think much of my panic at all, instead laughing on the other end,

“I know, it’s Kamei, right? She’s angry, isn’t she?”

“Kamei?”

“That’s right, she’s called Kamei something... Ah~~ Yeah, Shizuka.”

“Isn’t that a politician [9]?”

“What a bother~ Who would have thought she would catch me at my door? She’s as unwilling to lose as ever, I did text her.”

“You idiot!”

I cover my mouth with my right hand, crouching down with my back to Kamei Shizuka.

“Although her personality seems really tough to handle, but she looks super cute! Don’t reject her with a text, why don’t you try dating her for a couple months? Isn’t there a saying, ‘Try to bat, try to catch’?”

“Nobody actually says that normally, right? But she doesn’t only look cute, she’s pretty smart too. On that note, we were in the same class as her in the second year of middle school, y’know, Shibuya. It’s just that you don’t remember a thing, outside of baseball.”

“Really? I know her!?”

I look at the girl with her arms in front of her chest and an impatient expression on her face. Just as Murata said, I have no impression of her at all, but she does look very smart.

“...I really have no impression... Could it be that I sensed the danger, and naturally skipped over her?”

“Probably. Kamei hopes to decide who’s the winner between us once and for all with these mock exams.”

“Deciding it once and for all with the mock exams? But the real battlefield is the university entrance exam, right? Then what’s the point deciding the winner before that?”

“I don’t know, either—Anyway she’s not here to confess, but to issue a challenge! It’s just that the dates and schedules never sync up, she wanted to use the results at the cram school mocks today as the decider, it’s just that I only took three subjects before leaving.”

You shouldn’t leave just like that either!

Since he told me to pass the phone to her, I nervously hand the phone over to Kamei.

“I can answer the call if you want, but who’s on the other side?”

“Mura... Shibuya.”

“When you say Shibuya, do you mean that idiot Shibuya Yuuri whose head has nothing but baseball?”

In the cold winter night, I finally understand what kind of a person I am in a girl’s eyes. It really chills me to the bone.

Kamei Shizuka accepts the metallic blue cellphone, her expression full of surprise as she speaks. Her initially straight eyebrows start twisting unhappily, and I can’t help but stand at a side with my heart in my throat.

“...What is the meaning of this?”

What on earth did Murata say to her!?

Kamei’s tone gets angrier and angrier as she talks, until she finally says

something instigating, and shoves the phone back at me. She uses so much force it's like she wants to throw the phone onto the ground, it isn't easy for me to catch it properly.

"I can't believe it! The two of you actually became like that!?"

"B-became like what?"

Right now we've switched bodies, so the situation is indeed dire.

With Nobita's feelings, I watch Shizuka leave with Gian's footsteps before hurriedly asking my friend on the other end of the phone,

"What on earth did you say!?"

"Nothing much, just the truth. I said that Shibuya... In others words, I, am facing a crisis in the semester-end exams, so I had no choice but to ask Murata for help in a panic. And whether or not my friend can move on to the next year is naturally more important than Kamei, so it can't be helped that she was rejected."

"That's all you said?"

"Mn, I also said, what placing Kamei got in the mocks has nothing to do with me, but if I have to repeat a year, Murata will feel as though he's responsible for it too. And since I'm him important friend, Murata has a responsibility to help me become a great king."

"You actually said such weird things, with my mouth..."

His nonchalant tone coming over across the electronic waves, sounds like it's laughing at my helplessness.

"It doesn't matter, right--? After all we don't plan on going out with her, who cares what she thinks—"

"That's not the problem..."

She misunderstood, she definitely misunderstood, once the word 'king' gets mixed in, no matter how she interprets it, it would definitely become very weird, and there's no way she understood the real meaning.

"Let's put that aside for now, Shibuya, didn't I tell you I remembered

something very important? That concerns your life from now on, so I have to tell you right now, it's not clear over the phone."

"Okay, I'll come over to you right now. Where are you right now?"

"Look up—"

Opposite the zebra crossing with no traffic light, there is a telephone post with a lamp on it. Murata, with Shibuya Yuuri's appearance, is just underneath the lamp, waving at me from inside the disused-looking telephone booth.

"Dinner is French style vegetables stewed meat, you know—"

His expression is just too idiotic, even I feel embarrassed.

If there is information we can search up, to use as future reference, no matter what I really want to know, how many days on average could the people in the past who 'switched bodies once' tolerate?

We switched just a few hours ago, but we've long reached our limits.

"Who would have thought that even someone like me would start getting restless."

"I think it's not bad, it's pretty comfy in here. Your body is light and soft, feels pretty good, and it's easy even to climb the stairs. When I bend forward I can actually the fingertips can actually touch the toes, this is a first for me in my life —"

"That's the result of me working out every day... What on earth do you want to try?"

"A holistic trial, of course! I think a body that's good with exercise sure is convenient."

I on the other hand really envy people with a good brain. No matter how, this situation is really very unnatural. Add that to the fact that Murata said he remembered something very important, and I think we should do everything we can to return to normal! Even if we're not sure whether it is possible to go back, at the very least we should try.

But Murata seems a little reluctant to return to his original body, could he really like my mother's cooking that much?

In that case, it's no problem if he comes over to my house for dinner every night.

As for the important thing he talked about, it's like this.

He puts his frozen fingers into the hunting jacket pocket as he says, "You have to choose a bride, y'know!"

"Choose a pride--?"

"Not choose a pride, you have to choose a bride. If I remember correctly, you've already officially ascended the throne in your country. And over there, it just so happens at the same season a now, there will be a large-scale bride-selection event."

The shops on the street have already pulled down their metal doors, so the road heading to the station is a lot quieter than usual. By the time it gets to 9pm, all the local shopping streets will be filled with salarymen, exhausted from overtime on the weekends and ready to go home.

"Choosing a bride, huh—In other words, there's something like Valentine's there too?"

"Not at all."

That line interrupts my image of group dating.

"There is more than one woman involved, yes, but you would be alone. In other words, there will be a selection for His Majesty the Maou's bride from those who proposed and those who haven't over the past year."

"The Ma... my bride!?"

"That's right. But 'Who is His Majesty the Maou's Bride!' was an activity from quite a while ago, so whether or not it's still held now, I'm not too sure myself..."

"Stop kidding, I should be to decide who I marry, right! Speaking of which, I'm only 16! Legally I can't even marry yet, right!?"

"Please tell that to your Royal Educator yourself—Tell the person whose title

may be like Royal Educator or Acting Minister or Prime Minister or Person-in-Charge etc!"

My mind immediately comes up with an image of Günter with his hands raised up high, talking non-stop, the remnants of snow under his feet looking rather slippery. If it was him, he wouldn't care how old I am at, he'd just speed things up. Wait a sec, since it's that Lord von Christ, it wouldn't be surprising even if he shamelessly wore a pure white wedding dress and mixed in with the candidates.

"...Günter's... wedding dress..."



“Shibuya, can you not imagine anything too scary?”

It’s because he’s more suited to a wedding dress than other people, that’s why it’s scary.

“Anyway, if you simply decide date a girl in this period of time, it may very likely connect directly to the bride-selection activity. Tomorrow is the long-awaited Valentine’s Day, too, so there may be a truck of girls lining up to confess to you.”

“...What a practical way of making fun of me.”

“What? Did I say something stupid that surpasses even magic? So, if I stay in your body like this, won’t it be me having to face girls confessing? If we haven’t returned to normal after one whole day, I can’t deal with the attacks by phone in the morning either. After all, if I reject them too easily, Shibuya wouldn’t feel right about it. Strictly speaking, since I’m not actually Shibuya Yuuri himself, if I simply agree to the girls, what would you think?”

I think it’s not too late to start worrying when someone does actually go on the attack.

But if we’re still like this tomorrow, I bet even Murata won’t be able to stand it. After all for the past sixteen years, I’ve been living a life without any luck with girls, even the only chocolate I get on Valentine’s coming from my mom.

“And, a nonchalant answer from you=me, might make the other party think they’re the Maou’s bride. Even if we argue that the customs over there are different from Earth, I don’t think those blinded ministers would listen to us... Shibuya, are you listening to me?”

“...Yeah, it’s probably better to return to normal as soon as possible. After so many years and still taking a mother’s chocolate, that psychological pressure is seriously huge. Letting Murata who’s so popular classmates are even coming by to issue challenge letters face something like that, I’ll feel bad.”

“Speaking of being popular, when it comes to Valentine’s, I’ll also receive cards from Hawaii, you know!”

“...Murata, when did you go to Hawaii?”

So nice~~ The other party must be a pretty girl from the island of eternal summer.

“My element was always leaning towards globalization. Alright, Shibuya, now we have to fall down these stairs in one go.”

“What!?”

I look down at the (seemingly) endless train station stairs, so scared I gulp a mouthful of saliva. The place we’re standing isn’t far from the turnstiles. From here down to the faraway ground, looks like about as high as Mount Fuji’s 8th Station [10] to my eyes. It could be that my heart is swaying now that I’m actually there, and so my calculation ability has malfunctioned due to miscellaneous external factors.

“Really, Shibuya, did you forget? Did I tell you before--? As long there’s an impact larger than what we face when we switched, we can easily return to normal.”

“Wait a sec wait a sec, you said a similar impact, right? Not a larger impact, right!? Back then we fell down from the platform in the middle of the stairs, and now we’re on top of the stairs! If we fell from here, there’s no way we’ll escape unscathed, there’s a high chance we’ll just kick the bucket!”

“We won’t die, relax! And besides, there are prior cases. Also, Shibuya, don’t keep talking about dying like that.”

“Then you don’t simply tell me to fall down!”

“Relax, relax, we tried it once before. You just have to close your eyes, and everything will be like riding a roller coaster, it’ll be over before you know it.”

“Don’t please don’t be rash Murata even if we don’t do that the Earth will still go round—”

Murata seems determined to jump from the top floor no matter what, his hands holding my waist tightly, and taking one step into the air. Maybe it’s the break between trains arriving at the station now, because there are only a handful of passengers who got off the train walking by. It’s just that these rational people are giving the high school students hugging and shouting on the station stairs cold looks.

Maybe they are used to the things young people do these days, or those things end up the topic of casual conversation.

Hold on a sec, what if there's someone we know here? If there's a neighbor on the way home here, then by tomorrow we'll definitely be a hot topic of conversation. Just then the horn in my head starts blaring next door Mrs Ono's voice—

“Oh, dear, Mrs Shibuya, is your son troubled by something? I heard that he was going to die together in love with his male classmate from middle school at the statin stairs!”

Die together in love... die together in love... die together in love...

What a witness testimonial, as loud as a Dolby surround sound system.

“C-c-c-c-calm down, Murata! The way this is going, it'd highly likely that we'll be treated as a couple ready to die together in love!”

“Ah, is that so—”

Murata says in a tone that obviously hasn't thought too much about it, reaching his hand towards his head and touching Shibuya Yuuri's hair, unruly on the winter, with an action I'm not used to. This is a pretty strange feeling. Although my hand is touching my own hair, it's using someone else's habitual movement.

“Even if it was like that, it wouldn't be good for our reputation—And your brother won't be able to become governor.”

“...In that short time you were there, what did you hear from him?”

“Nah, just some life plans. He planned for you to join Ishihara Promotion [\[11\]](#), you know!”

Is Shouri planning to make us all a governor family?

“In that case we have to pretend that someone accidentally knocked us down... Ah~~Sorry, could the two of you lend us a moment.”

My friend looks around for a while, and asks two people who look like they just got off from work and are headed home. They even point at their own faces exaggeratedly. The man looks to be a little over twenty, wearing a jacket and a

hat that blocks his eyebrows, a bit of bristle I don't like on his chin. As for the one next to him, holding his arm and leaning her entire body on him, judging from the way her breasts are pressing on his body, that should be his girlfriend. She's wearing a cute jacket with knitted sleeves, and opening her mouth wide to laugh loudly, looking quite ridiculous. Those bright red fingernails that hurt my eyes are buried deep into his arm.

Her face red and her eyes moist, she stumbles over to us, but her face is still covered with a silly smile as she points at us and yells,

"Look, look—Tango! They're dancing the tango!"

What dancing the tango? We're not stuck together like this because we want to dance!"

They should be a little drunk... No, they're basically dead drunk. They're this drunk just past nine, by tomorrow they'll definitely be drunk past human limits.

"Murata, are you sure about getting drunkards to help us?"

"Otherwise, do you think strangers would possibly agree to this?"

You got a point.

I'm at a loss for words and Murata ignores me, giving the man with his hat to his eyebrows the right of action directly.

"Excuse me, could you please knock into us? You just have to knock into us lightly with your body. Uh—if possible try to make it look like an accident no one will suspect."

"Ah--? Pretend to accidentally knock into you guys--? It sounds a lot like an assassination, hey—What to do, no one asked me to do this before."

"You're asking me what to do, I don't know either! The two of them are dancing the tango—"

Maybe 'tango' is particularly funny to her, because the girl has been laughing non-stop from start to finish.

"Just do as he says, then—It's okay, do as he says, please-- I want to see the tango see the tango see the tan—go! Hey--!"

It sounds slow when I describe it but it was fast then, because that girl uses all the strength in her body to crash into us, while we were standing in place—though her hands were still holding onto her beloved man's arm.

"Wait a sec! That's not a knock, that's an atta... Waa--!"

By the time I realize my body is slanting, Murata and I are already floating in mid-air. And as we're almost going to hit the ground, I hear something unlucky. It's not a joke, but some unlucky words.

"I want to dance the tango too--!"

As I think "What are you saying", it's already too late.

In the end we didn't dance the tango as expected, but fall into a bundle instead.

...Hey ...Hey ...Wake up...

My consciousness blurry, I dazedly think.

This is 'that', that 'Hey~ Nii-chan' game my big brother loves to play so much. If you turn around when someone yells 'Hey~', your face will be poked by that person's index finger. The little sister with her hair in twin ponytails shakes her head and says happily, "How annoying~~Nii-chan, really, I fell for it~~" But Big Brother you've played too many eroges. Also, you have too much imagination when it comes to little sisters.

"Hey~ You two, are you okay?"

If I turn my head just like that, I'll just make my childish big brother even happier. So I decide to feint sleep, until he loses his patience.

Maybe it's because he's given up, because the young man's voice sounds worried,

"It's not working—I can't seem to wake them up—What to do now—"

The young man... No, this isn't someone else's voice, it's my voice. Although the words are pulled out, but that is indeed my voice.

"Nothing we can do about it, I don't want to bring the cops into this, we might as well scram."

The cops!?

"Ohh—But what do I do, I look like this—"

"What's there to do, you've basically gotten 7 years younger."

"Really? Do you prefer the young ones?"

Although I want to get up immediately, I can't. Because my back and waist both hurt like hell. It's practically impossible to get up immediately, since I did fall down from the top of the stairs. Oh, right, Murata and I asked a passing couple to knock into us, and then we tumbled down the station stairs, all four of us at once, too.

"Mmrgh... Oh yeah, Mura... What about Murata..."

"Ah, looks like he's awake."

He is Shibuya Yuuri.

"What!?"

Why am I looking at myself!? I rub my eyes desperately, terrified that I hit myself somewhere. But my fingertips turn out to be such a fiery red color.

"Waa, what is this!? My fingers are bleeding excessively! Oh god, what now? I pitch and bit with my right hand... But why doesn't it hurt at all... Ah--!"

No wonder it doesn't hurt. The reason my fingers are all red, is because there are a girl's nail polish all over them. But why are my fingers so pretty all of a sudden?

"Hey hey hey—Normally people call that blood--? I used an hour on that masterpiece~~"

The Shibuya Yuuri staring at me, actually starts complaining all upset in a girly voice.

"Who are you? Speaking of which, who am I!?"

An unknown fragrance wafts over from my body, and I actually get butterflies in my stomach. But this time I can see very clearly, meaning I didn't switch bodies with Murata.

"W-where's Murata? Ah~~ Perfect, there you are."

Murata Ken with his glasses all crooked, is standing right next the Shibuya Yuuri who's crouching down and looking at me. "The two of us" are even stuck together, holding hands tightly.

Hold on, calm down, Shibuya Yuuri.

The person who seems very close to my friend, leaning tightly on him, is definitely me. That's the Shibuya Yuuri I've been used to seeing in the mirror for sixteen years. It's just that I'm used to practicing my batting in the mirror, so I only remember how I look like in my uniform. So then whose gaze is looking at them now? Who do these eyes belong to?"

"...Could it be?"

It couldn't, right?

Just then, not far away from me, the man with bristles and a hat blocking his eyebrows lying not far away, blinks his eyelids and opens his eyes. Just as I'm at a loss at how to address him, the man's mouth asks,

"Mmgh—Ouch... How is it, Shibuya, did we switch back?"

Could it be that he's Murata!?

In that case, who am I this time...?

## References

1. ↑ Once manager of the Seibu Lions.  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsutomu\\_Ito](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsutomu_Ito))
2. ↑ A Japanese director whose movie 'Tenkosei'  
(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tenk%C5%8Dsei>) is about a boy and girl who

fell down the stairs and exchanged bodies.

3. ↑ An anime based on a book.  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog\\_of\\_Flanders\\_\(TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog_of_Flanders_(TV_series)))
4. ↑ Japanese actress ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reiko\\_Takashima](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reiko_Takashima))
5. ↑ This part is a bit troublesome; there doesn't seem to be an actual 'my' before 'hands' and 'head', until 'my face'. It's hard to show in the translation, but actually since the switch Yuuri seems to avoid referring to any part of that body as 'my' until this point.
6. ↑ Japanese singer, lyricist, composer, novelist, actor, and a film producer.  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masashi\\_Sada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masashi_Sada))
7. ↑ I think that would be a correct literal translation of 'Gokudo no Onnatachi', a movie (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0225881/>)
8. ↑ Erotic games, or date sims.
9. ↑ Google this name and get ready for a shock xD
10. ↑ A landmark/marker(?) about 3000m up Mt Fuji
11. ↑ Apparently a powerful company? Not too sure...